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## Response to Intervention vs. Severe Discrepancy Model: Identification of Students with Specific Learning Disabilities

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of educators on the acceptance of either the Response to Intervention (RTI) model or the Severe Discrepancy (SD) model in the identification of students with a SLD. The study consisted of 160 general education (GE) teachers and 119 special education (SPED) teachers. The study used a survey method to determine participants' acceptance of the RTI model over the SD model. The study results revealed significant findings for SPED teachers versus GE teachers in their acceptability of RTI as an effective method of evaluation for SLD. Overall educators endorsed the use of the RTI model over the SD model. However, GE teachers significantly preferred the RTI model as the more appropriate method to identify student learning problems than SPED teachers. This difference may be due to SPED teacher's ability to interpret data gathered from both RTI model data and SD model data. Both GE and SPED teachers believed that the RTI model was beneficial for a child. The use of the RTI model appears to be the more accepted model for the determination of an SLD. There were no significant differences found among educators with regards to the use of the SD model. However, mean scores did indicate that SPED teachers were more likely to endorse the SD model than GE teachers. Lack of significant findings among educators in their endorsement of the SD model may have been the result of an affinity towards the RTI model in general. Future, use of the RTI model will require specific professional development training in the area of the use of progress monitoring data to guide instruction.

**Keywords:** Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), Response to Intervention (RTI), & Severe Discrepancy Model (SDM)

Pragmatism will be the epistemological position guiding this study of special education eligibility regarding SLD under RTI. Pragmatism originated in the United States during the late 1800s. Pragmatism is the school of philosophy in

which truth is based on the experiences of the individual. If an individual has an experience it could not be denied nor discounted since it is the experience of the individual that matters. Things that are visible and experienced are considered real.

Reality is ever changing based upon experiences and how these experiences are applied to problems. No two individuals will ever have the same experience as reality is ever changing (Nodding, 2007). The problem of reading difficulties has been a perplexing one and often times a one-size fits all approach is taken when addressing remediation in this area. The pragmatist would approach reading difficulties by addressing the individual needs of each child. Designing individual programs of instruction to address the student's specific difficulties would be a pragmatic approach to the problem of learning difficulties. The pragmatist believes that we learn through our experiences and knowledge is gained by applying this knowledge to real world situations (Danforth, 2008).

The pragmatic view suggests all individuals are capable of learning and education should demonstrate solutions to practical problems (Danforth, 2008). Education involves a process of hypothesis testing to solve problems that are experienced by individual in society (Henry, 2005). These experiences allow people to become reflective thinkers and allow individuals to pursue their own interest and ideas (Sutinen, 2008). The pragmatic view also stipulates that the curriculum within the school system should be ever changing and offer variety, since people are complex beings (Noddings, 2007). The pragmatic view offers a perspective that is practical and useful when interpreting the results of this study.

When pragmatism is used to examine the issue of special education eligibility under RTI, Dewey's point that learning is based on the student's interests, but facilitated by teachers comes to mind (Noddings, 2007). The pragmatic view suggests that education needs to meet the needs of all students. RTI does meet the

needs of students who are struggling academically; however, the act of labeling a student as "SLD" may contradict the pragmatic view, since the pragmatist sees all students as capable of learning (Danforth, 2008). Identifying a student as learning disabled suggests that the student is not capable of learning without special education services. A pragmatist would not agree with the premise that students with learning disabilities are resistant to intervention. The pragmatist would argue that all students are capable of learning at their specific level (Noddings, 2007).

Data are limited as to which method is more acceptable at identifying students as having a SLD under the RTI model or the Severe Discrepancy model (Burns, M. K., Jacob, S., & Wagner, A. R., 2008). Eligibility practices have been established for more than 20 years, and with the introduction of the RTI model the risks of misidentification are high unless specific criteria and procedures are established using these new practices (Messick, 1984). The pragmatist would argue that the mere labeling of a student is not practical as it does nothing to solve the problem the student is having with the curriculum (Danforth, 2008).

The use of the Severe Discrepancy model to identify a student with a SLD is practical, as it allows for a specific assessment with specific set of criteria to be used in order to establish that a student is learning disabled (Burns et al., 2008). The pragmatist would endorse the methods of evaluation used within the Severe Discrepancy model due to their practicality (Danforth, 2008). The pragmatist would argue that the problem with the evaluation process is that it does nothing to address the learning problems of the student (Danforth, 2008). The pragmatic view endorses the use of real-world experiences in order to learn, and thus, the RTI model, which utilizes

curriculum intervention to address the specific needs of the students, is a real-world approach to intervention (Danforth, 2008).

The appropriateness and instructional quality of the program may come into question when the referral to special education comes into play (Burns, 2007). The data used to determine eligibility under RTI is not well established at this time, thus decreasing the validity and reliability of the RTI model for special education eligibility (Burns et al., 2008). The pragmatist would argue that this approach of intervention, although practical in terms of addressing the needs of the student and being teacher led, does not offer the variety of interventions needed to address the individual needs of each child's specific learning difficulties (Noddings, 2007). Most of the procedures used within the RTI model, such as movement from one tier to the next, are still in their infancy (Burns et al., 2008). Educators across the United States are using RTI to implement appropriate interventions to address the learning needs of students; however, the expectation is that students will make adequate progress based upon a standard set in comparison with the group's progress. This pragmatist would argue this is contrary to the view that all individuals are capable of learning (Noddings, 2007).

The disagreement between and among professionals regarding the evaluation of students with learning disabilities has caused much debate (Johnson, Humphrey, Mellard, Woods, & Swanson, 2010). IDEA 2004 was an attempt to remedy the evaluation debate by including the behavioral component of RTI (Buttner & Hasselhorn, 2011). Students identified as learning disabled are referred to as having a SLD under education criteria. IDEA 2004 allows states to evaluate children for a SLD by utilizing performance data gathered from scientifically based

interventions (Buttner & Hasselhorn, 2011). The shift to the use of the RTI model was intended to provide targeted interventions to all children to increase learning and avoid school failure by providing scientifically based intervention to all struggling students as identified by school staff (Compton, D. L., Gilbert, J. K., Jenkins, J. R., Fuchs, D., Fuchs, L., Cho, E., Barquero, L. A., & Bouton, B., 2012).

The concern with eliminating the Severe Discrepancy model for special education eligibility is the difficulty associated with the definition of "adequate progress" within each tier of the RTI model (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). Using this method stipulates that if a student does not make adequate progress he or she would then be referred for a special education evaluation in the area of a SLD after going through the three tiers of the RTI model (Shinn, 2007). Without the Severe Discrepancy model, eligibility for special education would be based on the progress monitoring data available within the RTI model. Using the RTI model, a student will go through all three tiers, and if adequate progress is not made the student is automatically identified as having a SLD and thus eligible for special education (Shinn, 2007).

The Severe Discrepancy model allows educators to determine if a student's inadequate progress is commensurate with his or her cognition and whether the student is working to his or her potential. The RTI model dictates that if a student is not making adequate progress and is moved from one tier and to the next, it is due to a learning disability, and thus, the student is automatically placed in special education (Buffum, Matto, & Weber, 2010). Research is inconsistent as to which model correctly identifies a student as having a SLD, as there are many theoretical interpretations of what constitutes a student with a learning

disability (Shinn, 2007; Stuebing, Fletcher, Branum-Martin, & Francis, 2012). Current research suggests that with the addition of the RTI model fewer students are being identified with a SLD; however, the data is not conclusive because California has not made the switch to the exclusive use of the RTI model for special education eligibility (Zirkel, 2010).

The process of evaluating a child for special education when using IDEA (2004) standard is to be conducted in a nondiscriminatory manner. A non-discriminatory evaluation involves a multidisciplinary team. A multidisciplinary team consists of the school psychologist, general education teacher, a special education teacher, and either a resource specialist or a special day classroom teacher along with a speech therapist. The tests used to evaluate the child are selected based upon the student characteristics that may create a bias for the child (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2004). There are several tests of intelligence that are used as part of the process for evaluating children for SLDs. These tests include the Kaufman Assessment Battery for Children II (KABC II) (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2004) and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children IV (WISC IV) (Flanagan & Kaufman, 2004). The tests are often selected based upon the child's language development; for example, the KABC II is often selected when the child has limited language skills or is a second language learner (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2004). The KABC II is often given to children with autism as well as to children for whom English is a second language (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2004). This is one of the strengths of the KABC II.

The examiner's awareness of the strengths and weaknesses of each intelligence test may assist the examiner in selecting tests that decrease bias and or

discrimination for the student being tested. All intelligence tests have strengths and weakness. Research shows that the WISC IV has several advantages and disadvantages as an intelligence test. The WISC IV is designed to minimize the cultural bias for English-speaking children in the United States (Flanagan & Kaufman, 2004). However if a student does not come from an English-speaking background from within the United States the WISC IV may create some difficulty to performance or incorrectly predict the child's potential. Most tests are not without some bias; however, the examiner should be sensitive to the purpose of the assessment and the background of the child being assessed (Flanagan & Kaufman, 2004). There are many factors to consider when selecting an intelligence test to administer children; a child's ethnicity, cultural background, and language spoken in the home are just a few of the factors to consider when selecting an intelligence to administer (Flanagan & Kaufman, 2004).

This study evaluates the acceptability of the RTI model versus the Severe Discrepancy model in the identification of students with specific learning disabilities. The state of California continues to use the Severe Discrepancy model in the identification of students with SLDs. IDEA (2004) allows states to adopt the RTI model in the identification of students with SLDs. California has yet to fully adopt the RTI model as other states have done across the country (Kemerer & Sansom, 2009). The research question this study will investigate is

Will general education teachers and special education teachers show a difference in their levels of acceptance for either the Severe Discrepancy model or the RTI?

### Methods

This study was conducted to determine the acceptability of the RTI model versus the Severe Discrepancy model in determining special education eligibility under the category of a SLD. A survey method was used to collect data to determine participants' acceptance of one model over the other.

#### Participants

The participants studied for this study were special education teachers and general education teachers working in the Orange County area. Special education teachers currently teaching and attending universities in Orange County, Southern California. General education teachers were gathered from the database of the Orange County union president. Surveys were collected from 279 participants. There were 160 general education teachers, and 119 special education teachers. There were 23 males and 256 females who participated in the study.

#### Instrumentation and Data Collection

This study utilized the Assessment Rating Profile-Revised (ARP-R; Eckert, Hintze, & Shapiro, 1999) to assess the level of acceptance of educators regarding the RTI model and the Severe Discrepancy model at identifying students with a SLD. The ARP-R is a 12-item scale that consists of questions that attempt to gauge a participant's level of the RTI model and the Severe Discrepancy model in identifying a student with a SLD. A general assessment acceptability score (GAA) was obtained from the participants' overall ratings on the scale. The scale used a 6-point Likert scale that ranges from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. A response of "1" indicates that the participant strongly disagreed with the statement and a response of 6 indicates that the participant strongly agreed with the statement. The ARP-R has a test-retest reliability of  $r = 0.82$

and  $r = 0.85$  and an internal consistency reliability of  $r = .99$  (Eckert et al., 1999). The surveys were distributed via on-line electronic system as well as by in-person survey distribution. A description of how a student would be assessed and identified under either the RTI model or the Severe Discrepancy model was provided to each participant. Each participant was provided one model to evaluate the acceptability of that model in the identification of a student with a SLD. The vignette model description detailed a real student found ineligible for special education under both the RTI model and the Severe Discrepancy model. The same student was used in both vignettes. The student used in the study was evaluated under the Severe Discrepancy model as well as the RTI model. The Severe Discrepancy vignette provides the data from the full assessment conducted by the multidisciplinary team. The student received a cognitive, achievement and speech and language evaluations. The student also was part of the RTI program. The student progressed through all three tiers of the RTI program. The student's progress was monitored and this data was used in the RTI vignette.

Data were collected from the university teacher credentialing programs in Orange County, Southern California. Participants were recruited with the use of an online survey that will be sent via email. The email described the study and asked participants to participate by logging onto a web-based survey through Qualtrics. Participants were asked to complete a 20-minute survey. The surveys were distributed to each person individually. Participants were randomly given either the RTI model of the survey or the Severe Discrepancy model of the survey. No participant was allowed to complete both surveys. Participants were surveyed during instructional time in the

university teacher credentialing programs. Whole classrooms were given one form of the survey alternating between different classrooms. The survey consisted of a demographic section and a vignette of either the Severe Discrepancy or the RTI model along with the ARP-R questionnaire. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze and organize the data.

### **Data Analysis**

This study utilized a quantitative design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The survey evaluated the level of acceptance of the RTI model and/or the Severe Discrepancy model with regard to identifying students with a specific learning disability (SLD) within a large school district in Orange County. Data was gathered within one survey. There were two forms of the survey. One survey form described the assessment of a student using the RTI model and the other survey form described the assessment of a student using the Severe Discrepancy model. In both survey forms the same student scenario was used and the student was found ineligible for special education in both models. The survey was randomly distributed to the participants to ensure equal distribution of each type of survey. Demographic data was analyzed using SPSS, Version 20. Demographic data was gathered to describe the sample used for the study. The demographic data consisted of the mean, median, and modes for gender, ethnicity, highest degree earned, years of experience, school setting, exposure to the Severe Discrepancy model, and exposure to the RTI model. T-tests were used to compare the means of educators' level of acceptance of one model over the other.

The ARP-R scale was used to determine a participant's level of acceptance of either the RTI model or the Severe Discrepancy model across each item

on the scale. Participants were identified by demographic data. An ANOVA was also utilized to compare the means between the two models with regard to the GAA scores across demographics. Several T-Test analyses were conducted to determine the difference between the means for the RTI model and the Severe Discrepancy model and the items on the ARP-R scale. The two groups, the RTI group and the Severe Discrepancy group, were compared across items on the ARP-R scale.

### **Results**

This study was conducted to determine the acceptability of the RTI model versus the Severe Discrepancy model in determining special education eligibility under the category of a SLD. A survey method was used to collect data to determine participants' acceptance of one model over the other. Surveys were collected from 279 participants. Table 1 provides a total sample summary of the participant demographics on gender, age ranges, ethnicity and years of work experience. There were 160 general education teachers, and 119 special education teachers. There were 23 males and 256 females who participated in the study.

Table 1 provides a summary of the participant demographic information based upon years of work experience, age, and ethnicity of the total sample. Participants identified the number of years they have worked within the educational setting: 52% of participants had one to five years of experience, 19% had six to ten years of experience, 11% had 11 to 15 years of work experience, less than 1% had 16 to 20 years of experience and finally 11% had 21 or more years of work experience within the education setting.

Participant ages ranged from age 21 to 50 plus: 32% ranged in age from 21-25, 25% were 26 to 30 years of age, .07% ranged from 31 to 35 years of age, .07% were ages 36 to 40, .07 of the teachers were age 41 to 45, 13% were 46-50 years of age, and .06% were 50 plus years of age. The participants were ethnically diverse with the largest sample of participants identifying as White

with a percentage of 40%. The next largest ethnic group consisted of Latinos, which made up 38% of the sample. Asians made up .06% of the sample and .05% of the sample identified as Black. Native Americans made up less than 1% of the sample along with those identified as multiethnic and "other."

Table 1

*Participant Data by Gender, Age, Ethnicity and Years of Work Experience*

	General Education Teachers	Special Education Teachers
	N	N
Gender		
Male	15	8
Female	145	111
Age Ranges		
21-25	61	31
26-30	29	41
31-35	12	8
36-40	11	11
41-45	13	7
46-50	26	10
50+	8	11
Ethnicity		
Asian or Asian-American	10	9
Latino(a)Latino-American	56	49
Black or African-American	8	6
Native American	11	1
White	64	48
Multi-ethnic	6	4
Other	5	2
Years of Work Experience		
1-5	82	63
6-10	31	22
11-15	27	5
16-20	12	7
21+	8	22
Total	160	119

The survey consisted of an Acceptability scale, which consisted of 12-items, using a 6-point Likert scale. The scale

was used to analyze each item on the Acceptability scale using the demographic information. Mean (M) scores and standard



deviation (SD) scores were used to make comparisons between the RTI model and the Severe Discrepancy model using the Acceptability scale items.

Table 2 lists the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) for the RTI and SD model across items on the Acceptability scale for all participants. Table 3 shows the *F* values and the *p* values for all items on the Acceptability scale across the RTI model and the SD model. It was determined that there were a number of significant findings regarding the preference of the RTI model over the SD model. More educators

significantly preferred the RTI model ( $M = 4.32$ ;  $SD = .98$ ) as an acceptable assessment for the child's problem in the vignette than the SD model ( $M = 3.31$ ;  $SD = 1.26$ ). More educators believed that school psychologists would find the RTI model ( $M = 4.26$ ;  $SD = .94$ ) appropriate for other types of problems in addition to the one described in the vignette over the SD model ( $M = 3.57$ ;  $SD = 1.23$ ). Most educators would suggest the use of the RTI model to their school psychologists ( $M = 4.14$ ;  $SD = 1.04$ ) over the SD model ( $M = 3.12$ ;  $SD = 1.20$ ).

Table 2

*Participant Mean and Standard Deviation for the SD and RTI Model Across Each Acceptability Question for All GE and SPED Teachers*

No.	Acceptability Question	SD		RTI	
		M	SD	M	SD
1	This would be an acceptable assessment strategy for the child's problem.	3.31	1.26	4.32	0.98
2	Most school psychologists would find this approach to assessment appropriate for problems in addition to the ones described.	3.57	1.23	4.26	0.94
3	This assessment should prove effective in identifying the child's problems.	2.97	1.22	4.02	1.16
4	I would suggest the use of this assessment to school psychologists.	3.12	1.20	4.14	1.04
5	I would be willing to receive assessment results such as those described with a student transferring into my school district.	3.57	1.37	4.29	1.15
6	This assessment would be appropriate for a variety of children.	3.28	1.26	4.01	1.24
7	This assessment was a fair way to identify the child's problem.	3.10	1.25	4.03	1.10
8	This assessment was reasonable for the problems described.	3.14	1.21	4.24	1.05
9	I liked the assessment procedures used in this assessment.	2.97	1.20	4.11	1.09
10	This assessment was a good way to handle the child's problems.	2.82	1.16	3.98	1.12
11	Overall, this assessment would be beneficial for the child.	3.04	1.27	4.28	1.10
12	This assessment is likely to be helpful in the development of intervention strategies.	3.21	1.33	4.43	1.12

*Note.* SD Model  $N = 122$ ; RTI Model  $N = 157$

Educators would be willing to receive assessment results from transferring students in their district using data from the

RTI model ( $M = 4.29$ ;  $SD = 1.15$ ) versus the SD model ( $M = 3.57$ ;  $SD = 1.37$ ). Educators in the study believed that the RTI model ( $M =$

4.03; SD = 1.10) was a fair method of evaluation for the child's problem when compared to the SD model (M = 3.10; SD = 1.25). Educators also believed that the RTI model (M = 4.24; SD = 1.05) provided a reasonable assessment for the child's problem identified in the vignette over the SD model (M = 3.14; SD = 1.21). The overall assessment provided within the RTI model

(M = 4.28; SD = 1.10) was beneficial for the child in the vignette when compared to the SD model (M = 3.04; SD = 1.27). Educators believed the RTI model (M = 4.43; SD = 1.12) would be a helpful method of assessment for the development of intervention goals than the SD model (M = 3.21; SD = 1.33).

Table 3

*F Values and Significance Levels for the Acceptability Scale for Participants Across the SD and RTI Models for All GE and SPED Teachers*

No	Acceptability Scale	F	p
1	This would be an acceptable assessment strategy for the child's problem.	20.7	.000**
2	Most school psychologists would find this approach to assessment appropriate for problems in addition to the ones described.	21.1	.000**
3	This assessment should prove effective in identifying the child's problems.	0.55	.458
4	I would suggest the use of this assessment to school psychologists.	10.92	.001**
5	I would be willing to receive assessment results such as those described with a student transferring into my school district.	8.53	.004**
6	This assessment would be appropriate for a variety of children.	1.29	.257
7	This assessment was a fair way to identify the child's problem.	5.10	.025*
8	This assessment was reasonable for the problems described.	6.38	.012*
9	I liked the assessment procedures used in this assessment.	2.74	.099
10	This assessment was a good way to handle the child's problems.	1.52	.218
11	Overall, this assessment would be beneficial for the child.	8.06	.005**
12	This assessment is likely to be helpful in the development of intervention strategies.	9.38	.002**

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

The data presented in Table 4 provides the means and standard deviations for general education (GE) teachers and special education (SPED) teacher regarding their acceptance of the SD model. Table 5 shows the  $F$  values and the  $p$  values for GE and SPED teachers across all items on the Acceptability scale on the SD model. Data showed that there were no significant findings regarding the acceptability of the SD

model between GE and SPED teachers. Examination of the means revealed that mean scores were consistently higher among SPED teachers than GE teachers regarding the acceptability of the SD model. One item did approach significance with more SPED teachers (M = 3.39; SD = .99) endorsing the use of the SD model than GE teachers (M = 2.70; SD = 1.18).

Table 4

*Participant Mean and Standard Deviation for the GE and SPED teacher Across Each Acceptability Question for the SD Model*

No.	Acceptability Question	GE		SPED	
		M	SD	M	SD
1	This would be an acceptable assessment strategy for the child's problem.	3.0 1	1.2 1	3.8 2	1.11
2	Most school psychologists would find this approach to assessment appropriate for problems in addition to the ones described.	3.5 1	1.2 2	3.6 3	1.21
3	This assessment should prove effective in identifying the child's problems.	2.8 0	1.1 3	3.1 9	1.24
4	I would suggest the use of this assessment to school psychologists.	3.0 0	1.2 2	3.2 6	1.36
5	I would be willing to receive assessment results such as those described with a student transferring into my school district.	3.2 2	1.2 7	4.1 4	1.38
6	This assessment would be appropriate for a variety of children.	3.0 3	1.2 0	3.6 0	1.28
7	This assessment was a fair way to identify the child's problem.	2.8 0	1.1 8	3.5 6	1.20
8	This assessment was reasonable for the problems described.	2.8 8	1.1 8	3.5 6	1.04
9	I liked the assessment procedures used in this assessment.	2.7 0	1.1 8	3.3 9	0.99
10	This assessment was a good way to handle the child's problems.	2.6 1	1.1 4	3.1 2	0.97
11	Overall, this assessment would be beneficial for the child.	2.7 9	1.2 7	3.4 3	1.09
12	This assessment is likely to be helpful in the development of intervention strategies.	2.9 2	1.3 2	3.6 8	1.12

*Note.* GE Teachers N = 160; SPED Teachers N = 119

Table 5

*F Values and Significance Levels for the Acceptability Scale Across the GE and SPED Groups for the SD Model*

No.	Acceptability Scale	F	p
1	This would be an acceptable assessment strategy for the child's problem.	0.97	.32
2	Most school psychologists would find this approach to assessment appropriate for problems in addition to the ones described.	.057	.81
3	This assessment should prove effective in identifying the child's problems.	1.03	.31
4	I would suggest the use of this assessment to school psychologists.	2.04	.15
5	I would be willing to receive assessment results such as those described with a student transferring into my school district.	.552	.45
6	This assessment would be appropriate for a variety of children.	.251	.61
7	This assessment was a fair way to identify the child's problem.	.141	.70
8	This assessment was reasonable for the problems described.	.439	.50
9	I liked the assessment procedures used in this assessment.	3.10	.08
10	This assessment was a good way to handle the child's problems.	2.14	.14
11	Overall, this assessment would be beneficial for the child.	2.33	.12
12	This assessment is likely to be helpful in the development of intervention strategies.	1.69	.19

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$

The data present in Table 6 provides the means and standard deviations for general education (GE) teachers and special education (SPED) teacher regarding their acceptance of the RTI model. Table 7 shows the  $F$  values and the  $p$  values for GE and SPED teachers across all items on the Acceptability scale on the RTI model. Data showed that there were significant findings regarding the acceptability of the RTI model between GE and SPED teachers. SPED teachers ( $M = 4.55$ ;  $SD = .83$ ) were significantly more likely than GE teachers ( $M = 4.09$ ;  $SD = 1.22$ ) to believe the RTI model was an acceptable model of assessment for the child's problems ( $F = 6.97$ ;  $p = .00$ ). There were significant findings with regards to GE teachers ( $M =$

4.07;  $SD = 1.07$ ) believing the RTI model would be an effective method in identifying the child in the vignette's problems when compared to SPED teachers ( $M = 3.97$ ;  $SD = 1.28$ ). It was determined that GE teachers ( $M = 4.25$ ;  $SD = 1.10$ ) were significantly more likely to endorse the RTI model as appropriate method for evaluating children of different backgrounds when compared to SPED teachers ( $M = 3.80$ ;  $SD = 1.33$ ). SPED teachers ( $M = 4.66$ ;  $SD = .94$ ) were significantly more likely to view the RTI assessment as more helpful in the development of intervention strategies for the child than GE teachers ( $M = 4.20$ ;  $SD = 1.26$ ).

Table 6

*Participant Mean and Standard Deviation for the GE and SPED teacher Across Each Acceptability Question for the RTI Model*

No.	Acceptability Question	GE		SPED	
		M	SD	M	SD
1	This would be an acceptable assessment strategy for the child's problem.	4.09	1.22	4.55	0.83
2	Most school psychologists would find this approach to assessment appropriate for problems in addition to the ones described.	4.15	1.01	4.35	0.92
3	This assessment should prove effective in identifying the child's problems.	4.07	1.07	3.97	1.28
4	I would suggest the use of this assessment to school psychologists.	4.07	1.05	4.20	1.07
5	I would be willing to receive assessment results such as those described with a student transferring into my school district.	4.31	1.10	4.29	1.20
6	This assessment would be appropriate for a variety of children.	4.25	1.10	3.80	1.33
7	This assessment was a fair way to identify the child's problem.	3.98	1.09	4.08	1.11
8	This assessment was reasonable for the problems described.	4.20	1.05	4.26	1.10
9	I liked the assessment procedures used in this assessment.	4.13	1.10	4.08	1.14
10	This assessment was a good way to handle the child's problems.	3.81	1.21	4.15	1.05
11	Overall, this assessment would be beneficial for the child.	4.10	1.22	4.44	0.97
12	This assessment is likely to be helpful in the development of intervention strategies.	4.20	1.26	4.66	0.94

*Note.* GEN Teachers N = 160; SPED Teachers N = 119

Table 7

*F Values and Significance Levels for the Acceptability Scale Across the GE and SPED Groups for the RTI Model*

No.	Acceptability Scale	F	p
1	This would be an acceptable assessment strategy for the child's problem.	6.97	.00**
2	Most school psychologists would find this approach to assessment appropriate for problems in addition to the ones described.	0.33	.56
3	This assessment should prove effective in identifying the child's problems.	5.50	.02*
4	I would suggest the use of this assessment to school psychologists.	0.46	.49
5	I would be willing to receive assessment results such as those described with a student transferring into my school district.	0.13	.71
6	This assessment would be appropriate for a variety of children.	5.83	.01*
7	This assessment was a fair way to identify the child's problem.	0.01	.90

8	This assessment was reasonable for the problems described.	0.16	.68
9	I liked the assessment procedures used in this assessment.	0.00	.99
10	This assessment was a good way to handle the child's problems.	2.18	.09
11	Overall, this assessment would be beneficial for the child.	2.76	.09
12	This assessment is likely to be helpful in the development of intervention strategies.	8.33	.00**

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

### Discussion

The current study was grounded in pragmatism and based upon the information gathered and the views presented by the participants it can be concluded that the participants were not able to determine if either the RTI model or the Severe Discrepancy model meet the needs of the students. A pragmatist would argue that it is not necessary to endorse a method evaluation. It is important to determine how best to meet the learning needs of a student. Special education teachers did significantly endorse the RTI model as a method of evaluation that was beneficial for students. The recommendation of using both models in combination to determine eligibility would comply with the pragmatic position that education should meet the needs of all students. The problem would arise that this evaluation would only occur if the student was being evaluated for special education. This is where a pragmatist would disagree. A pragmatist would argue that eligibility for special education should not be necessary in order to provide a student the proper education.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions of educators on the acceptance of either the RTI model or the Severe Discrepancy model in the identification of students with a SLD (Hale, J. B., Kaufman, A., Naglieri, J. A., & Kavale, K. A., 2006; O'Donnell & Miller, 2011). Currently, the state of California continues to use the Severe Discrepancy model; however, across the United States others

states have adopted the RTI model for identification purposes of students with SLDs (Kemerer & Sansom, 2009). Information gathered from this study will assist educational leaders in understanding existing staff attitudes toward the acceptability of either the RTI model or the Severe Discrepancy model in the identification of students with a SLD. The study will also assist staff in deciding whether districts should chose to continue with the Severe Discrepancy model or switch to the RTI model. Educational leaders will be able to use the information gained from this study for strategic planning as well as professional development. If the state of California chooses to continue to use the Severe Discrepancy model while utilizing the RTI three-tiered intervention model, there may be confusion regarding eligibility for SLD. The information gathered from this study will facilitate the designing of professional development programs that target specific misconceptions regarding special education eligibility under SLD.

The decision to switch to the RTI model is made at the legislative level with minimal involvement from the individuals that work directly with children. The present study may assist state leaders in understanding the degree to which there may be resistance from staff to implement the RTI model or the Severe Discrepancy model to identify students with a SLD. Educators provide a perspective on the issue that state legislators should access prior to the implementation of any change to the

procedure of identification of students with a SLD. There is limited research in the area of acceptability regarding the procedures used to identify students with a SLD (O'Donnell & Miller, 2011).

This research is important and will make a significant contribution in assisting educational leadership in understanding the perceptions of those individuals directly involved with implementing either the RTI model or the Severe Discrepancy model. The reauthorization of IDEA (2004) was an attempt to remedy the tendency to misuse intelligence tests in the identification of students with SLDs by providing an alternative method of determining eligibility for special education with the use of the RTI model. The implementation of the RTI model in identifying students with disabilities as per IDEA (2006) requires that staff accept the RTI model as a viable model for determining eligibility for special education. IDEA 2006 allows states to continue to the Severe Discrepancy model in determining special education eligibility (IDEA, 2006; O'Donnell & Miller, 2011). The information obtained from this study will help administrators determine the type of training and resources that are necessary to assist in the implementation of either model in order to identify students with SLDs. The information will also assist school psychologists in educating staff as to best practices when evaluating students for a specific learning disability under either the RTI model or the Severe Discrepancy model.

It was found that overall as a group; educators were more accepting of the RTI model over the SD model for determining eligibility of a SLD. This was consistent with the first hypothesis that educators in general would support the use of the RTI model over the SD model. However, when an examination of which specific group endorsed one model over the other it was

determined that SPED teachers were more likely to endorse the RTI model than GE teachers. This finding may represent SPED teachers use of student data to monitor the progress of student achievement. RTI data is similar to data used to progress monitor the goal and objectives written for individual education plans. Thus, they have an appreciation for the RTI model that GE teachers have not yet developed. There were no significant findings among educators with regards to the use of the SD model. However, mean scores did indicate that SPED teachers were more likely to endorse the SD model than GE teachers. Lack of significant findings among educators in their endorsement of the SD model may have been the result of an affinity towards the RTI model in general.

Educators in study believed that the RTI model was acceptable for determining a child's learning problem. The RTI model is a method of intervention which provides continuous progress monitoring of a student's learning problem (Griffiths, Amanda, VanDerHeyden, & Lilles, 2009). The data provides an overview of the progress the child is making towards grade level achievement. The appeal of the RTI model for educators may be due to the familiarity of the data used for progress monitoring. The data is used by all teachers at all grade levels; however, the data used when evaluating a child through the SD model can only be interpreted by specific educators (i.e. School Psychologist and Resources Specialists).

Educators were more likely to believe that school psychologist would find the RTI model as appropriate for the identification of learning problems beyond that of an SLD. Since multiple pieces of data are gathered when using the RTI approach such as a child's reading fluency, reading comprehension, story recall and spelling.

This data is collected over several weeks and can be used to determine the progress that the child has made during the intervention. The data can then be used to project the child's future progress should the child continue on the same progression path. In the SD model, projection of performance is based upon the child's IQ score. The IQ score has come under fire as having significant and limited predictive power when using it with ethnically diverse populations (Hansen, Sharman & Esparza-Brown, 2009).

A significant number of educators in the study stated that they would suggest the use of the RTI model to their school psychologist. However, when educators were examined individually there was no significant difference found between GE teachers or SPED teachers in suggesting the use of the RTI model or the SD model to their school psychologist. This indicates that despite no one group specific group of educators exclusively endorsing the use of the RTI model to their school psychologist; educators as a group were willing to suggest this method of assessment to their school psychologist. The use of the RTI model data in determining eligibility under SLD would not be difficult to interpret for all educators since the progress monitoring data is used by many educators within the classroom setting. The exclusivity in the ability to interpretation progress monitoring data is not bound to one group of people. However, the evaluation for eligibility continues to fall under the role of the school psychologist. In the SD model, only the school psychologist interprets the data to evaluate a child for a SLD which determines eligibility. Data gathered from progress monitoring used in the RTI model is interpretable by both GE and SPED as well as school psychologists.

The RTI model uses a determination of "resistance" to the intervention to determine eligibility (Shinn, 2007). The use

of the term "resistance to intervention" is subjective as it has not been operationalized in education code (Shinn, 2007). However, the data used within the RTI model is understandable to all educators where as the data used in the SD model is only understandable to the school psychologist. Educators in the study were also willing to accept the data gathered using the RTI model for students transferring into their district. This endorsement continues to demonstrate the willingness of educators to prefer the use of the RTI model data over SD model data. GE teachers significantly preferred the use of RTI model data as more appropriate method to identify student learning problems than SPED teachers. This difference may be due to SPED teacher's ability to interpret data gathered from both RTI model data and SD model data, where as GE teachers are only familiar with RTI data.

The educators in the study believed that the RTI model provided the most reasonable assessment of a student's learning problem. The data used conducting an evaluation using the RTI model specifically aligns with the curriculum that the child is exposed to on a daily basis. Where as, when using the SD model standardized assessments are used which are nationally normed and do not align with the curriculum. This type of data is difficult for GE teacher to interpret since they may not understand how standardized assessments can be used to determine eligibility for an SLD when it does not align with the curriculum. Educators believed that the RTI model was beneficial for the child. This endorsement indicates that not only was the RTI model believed to be a reasonable assessment; educators believe it benefits the child. The specific benefit is not discussed; however, it could be argued that the data gathered is helpful in understanding the child's learning needs overall as it can be



used to develop interventions and provide more targeted strategies (Feifer, 2008; Berninger, O'Donnell, & Holdnack, 2008).

The RTI model was perceived to be useful in the development of intervention strategies for educators (Stuart, Rinaldi, and Higgins-Averill, 2010). In the study, SPED teachers were more likely to endorse the use of the RTI model as being useful in the development of intervention strategies for children. These results indicate that due to the role SPED teachers play within school settings they are able to use data to develop goals and objectives which target a student's learning needs. GE teachers do not use student data in the same way as SPED teachers. In the current educational setting, GE teachers use student data for placement within the three tiers of interventions. Students scoring within in specific ranges in the targeted area of academics will be either identified as at grade level, struggling, or intensive. These designations will then require that the child receive an intervention for their deficit. Future, use of the RTI model will require specific professional development training in the area of the use of progress monitoring data to guide instruction (Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor, & Cardarelli, 2010).

### **Summary & Conclusion**

This purpose of the study was to determine the acceptability of the RTI model or the Severe Discrepancy model in the determination of special education eligibility under SLD. The problem the study was attempting to solve was understanding the level of acceptance of either model among educators working in education and working directly with students. The perceptions of educators' are often not considered when changes to education are made at the legislative level. This study provided a platform to voice their level of acceptance

for either the RTI model or the Severe Discrepancy model.

The study was a quantitative study utilizing a survey format to gather data. There were two versions of the survey: an RTI model format and a Severe Discrepancy model format. The RTI model format describe the academic profile of a child who had progressed to the third tier of intervention, and the participant was asked to determine the acceptability of the model for adequately evaluating the child as having a SLD. The Severe Discrepancy model format described the academic and cognitive data of a child who had been evaluated, and the participant was required to determine whether the model was an acceptable method for determining special education eligibility under SLD. There were two participant groups: special education teachers and general education teachers.

The study results indicate that special education and general education teachers were able to significantly endorse the RTI model over the Severe Discrepancy model as an acceptable method for special education eligibility under SLD. The findings among general education and special education teachers were not significant over the SD model. The current study results add to the current literature on the acceptability of the RTI model versus the Severe Discrepancy model. Stakeholders are able to use the information gathered in this study to determine the level of staff training required for specific subgroups in school settings. Future research should focus on the merging of both the RTI model and the Severe Discrepancy model as a viable method of evaluation for the determination of special education eligibility under the category of disability for a SLD.

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