



# *RTI in Linguistically Diverse Schools: How to Address Challenges*

Janette Klingner  
University of Colorado at Boulder

Nonie Lesaux  
Harvard Graduate School of  
Education

International Reading Association

# *Challenges at Marble Mountain Elementary*



- Marble Mountain Elementary School
  - Student population about 92% Latino, 53% ELLs
  - 31% of ELLs receive special education services
  - Low performance on the state's high-stakes test
- Mountain View School District
  - Based their RTI model on a careful review of research
  - Provided 3 days of professional development on how to implement RTI (e.g., do progress monitoring).

# *Challenges at Rosa Parks Elementary*

- Student population about 58% Latino
  - The great majority are U.S. born and enrolled in PK.
- Classroom sizes are relatively small, the school culture is very positive, and at each grade level, teachers collect data on their students' literacy skills.
- From PK-3 the majority of students show significant progress in reading ability. Recently, however, only 15% of 3<sup>rd</sup> graders scored in the proficient range on the state standards test, while more than 50% were in the needs improvement range and almost 20% in the warning (far below) range.



Challenge 1: According to progress-monitoring data, more than half of the English language learners in each first-grade class are not reaching benchmarks. It is not feasible to provide Tier 2 instruction to all of these students.



- When many students are not progressing, **change instruction:**
  - Has the instructional program been validated with students like those in the class?
  - Is instruction at an appropriate level for students' language and learning needs?
  - Is the program well-implemented?
  - Are teachers sufficiently differentiating instruction to meet diverse student needs?
  - Is the environment conducive to learning?
- This will require:
  - **observing in classrooms** and supporting instruction
  - *developing and capitalizing on local expertise.*

Challenge #2: *In many cases, our screening and progress monitoring assessment batteries do not identify our ELLs who are at-risk for later reading difficulties.*



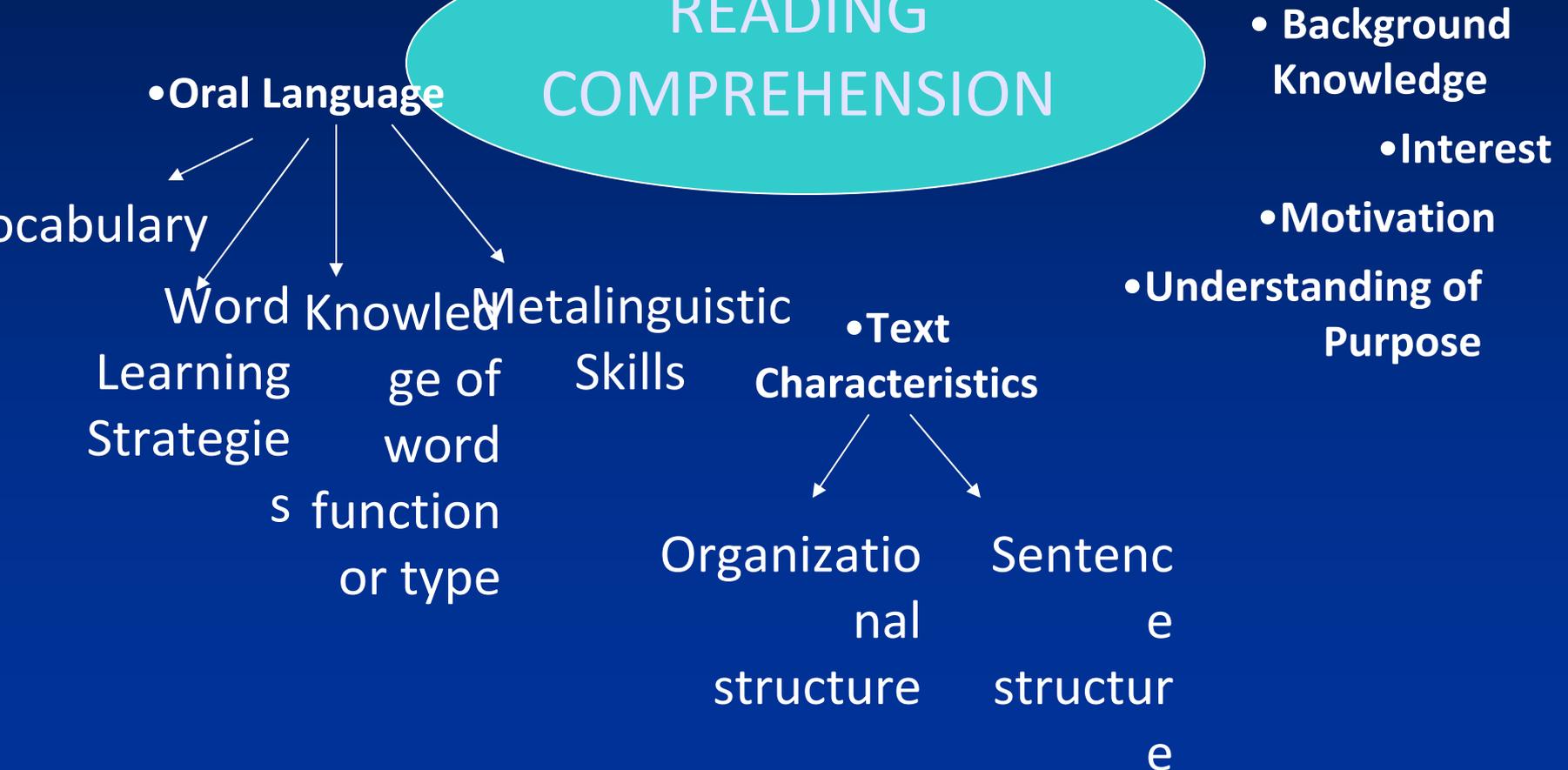
# The Comprehensive Assessment System

- No *one* literacy assessment is sufficient to screen for early difficulties or monitor progress
  - Many skills go into what we call “literacy,” and we need measurements across different areas to fully gauge student progress
- At the Rosa Parks school, faculty and administration had some data that indicated student progress, but they likely lacked a *complete* picture of student progress and achievement.
- The assessments being used, even with outside benchmarks, only provide a partial assessment of literacy skills

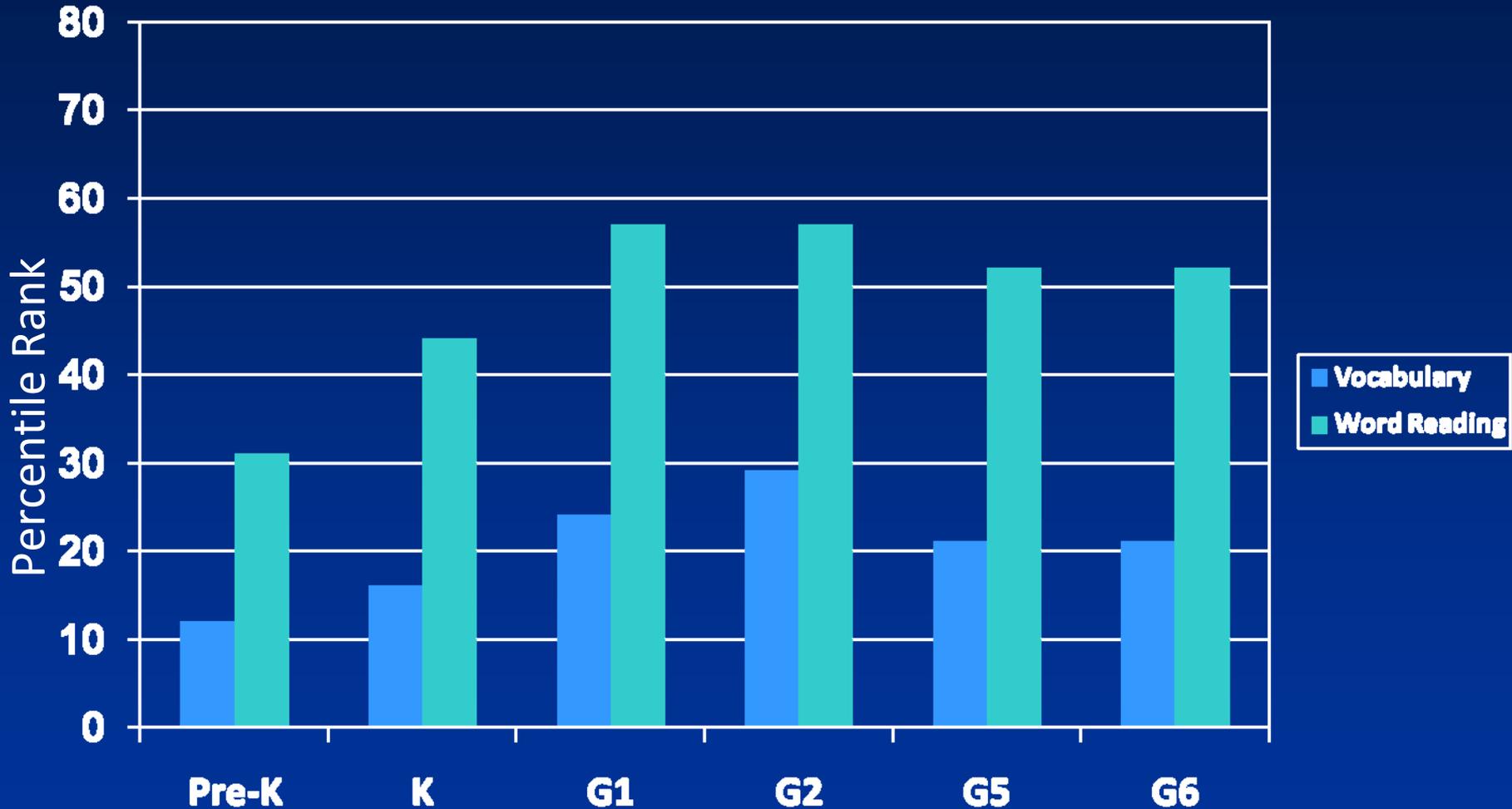


# A Common Scenario (con't)

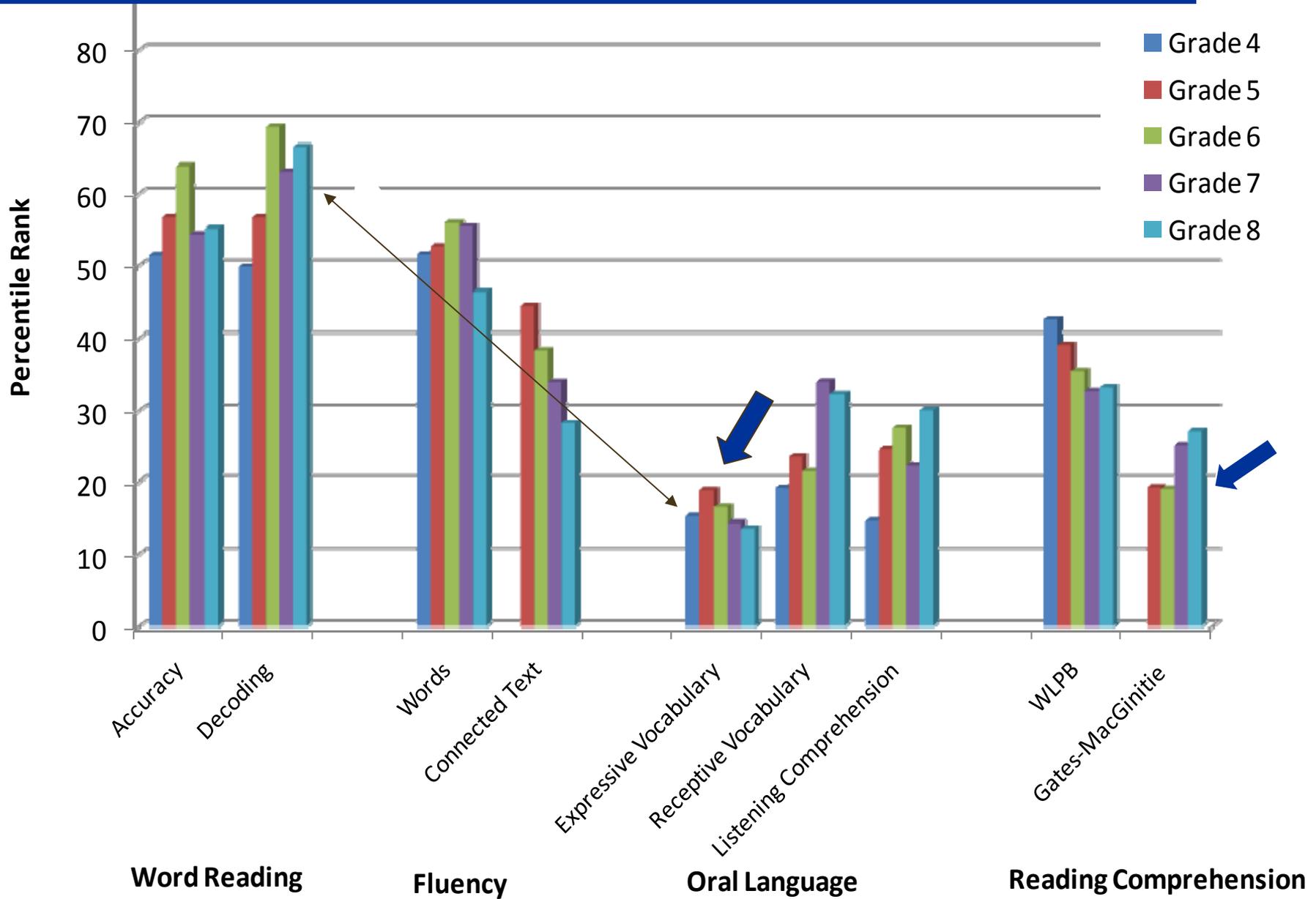
## Early Literacy Measures



# Gaps during Early Childhood



# The Gap between Reading Words & Comprehending Text



# Assessment within RTI

- *Multiple* assessment methods are needed to provide a comprehensive view of learning.
  - No single best test or assessment strategy.
  - Different assessments tap into different skills and knowledge.
- All RTI assessment strategies should reflect the multi-dimensional nature of language and literacy.



Challenge 3: School personnel are unclear how the RTI process is similar to and different from the Pre-Referral Process used in previous years. RTI meetings look much like the CST meetings of old, centered on possible reasons for a child's struggles from a deficit perspective, with a push to place students in special education.



- Shift from figuring out what is wrong with a student to **looking more broadly at the instructional context** and at how to provide support for all students.
- Focus first on improving core instruction, with differentiation.
  - Use progress monitoring data to look at classroom datasets.
- Make sure someone on the team has expertise in how to distinguish between language acquisition and learning disabilities.

Challenge 4: *School personnel are confused about Tier 2 interventions and wonder whether ELL services "count" as a secondary intervention.*



- English as a second language (ESL) and sheltered content should be part of Tier 1 and the core curriculum for *all* English language learners.
- The “20%” of students receiving Tier 2 interventions should NOT be mostly just the English language learners in a diverse school—if most English language learners are not progressing, the instruction is not sufficient.
- Tier 2 is part of general education—it supplements core instruction and is more intensive and targeted to students’ needs.



Challenge 5: School personnel are confused by what it means for practices to be “evidence-based.” They try to use generic “evidence-based practices” with their English language learners and blame them (and their families) when they show little progress.



# *What Do We Mean by “Evidence-based”?*

- The RTI model is based on the principle that instructional practices or interventions at each level should be based on scientific research evidence about “what works.”
- However, it is essential to find out ***what works with whom, by whom, for what purposes, and in what contexts***—



**One size does not fit all.**

# *With Whom?*

- When deciding if a practice is appropriate for implementation as part of an RTI model, it should have been validated with students like those with whom it will be applied.
- The National Reading Panel report “**did not address issues relevant to second language learning**” (2000, p. 3).



# *With Whom?*

- Research reports should include information about:
  - language proficiency
  - ethnicity
  - life and educational experiences (e.g., socio-economic, previous schooling)
- Data should be disaggregated to show how interventions might differentially affect students from diverse backgrounds.



# *With Whom?*

- English language learners are often omitted from participant samples because of their limited English proficiency.
- Yet language dominance and proficiency are important research variables and can affect treatment outcomes.
- Leaving students out of studies limits the external validity and applicability of such studies, especially for those who teach culturally and linguistically diverse students.



# *By Whom?*

- Who is implementing the instructional practice?
  - Researcher?
  - Experienced teacher?
  - Specialist?
  - Paraprofessional?



# *For What Purposes?*

- What is the goal of instruction?
  - Some widely touted instructional approaches help improve word identification skills, but not necessarily reading comprehension.
  - According to the Reading First Impact Study: “Reading First did not have statistically significant impacts on student reading comprehension test scores in grades 1-3.”



# *In What Contexts?*

- Variations in program implementation and effectiveness across schools and classrooms are common (see the First Grade Studies for a classic example, Bond & Dykstra, 1967).
  - When students struggle, is it the program, the teachers' implementation, or the school context?
  - What is it about the system that facilitates or impedes learning?
  - Schools are dependent on larger societal influences that should not be ignored.

# *In What Contexts?*

- It is essential to **observe** in classrooms.
  - Is the instruction appropriate for students' language and learning needs?
  - What is the relationship between a teacher and students?
  - How does the teacher promote interest and motivation?
- **We draw different conclusions when several students are struggling rather than just a few ...**



- Many factors affect a child's response to instruction:
  - Instructional method
  - Level of instruction
  - Learning environment
  - Student-teacher relationship
- Experimental research studies tell us what works best with the majority of students in a research sample, **not *all* students.**



# Opportunity to Learn?

Instruction in an RTI Model By Teachers who Lack Preparation in Teaching English language learners and Use Generic “Evidence-based” Practices

- All examples are from real classrooms with English language learners, most at beginning levels of English proficiency.
- The first two examples are of Tier 1 instruction.



# Tier 1 Example: Kindergarten

Students are seated in a circle on the alphabet rug. Teacher asks them to stand up, and says, “Let’s do the alphabet rap song.” Teacher begins to rap and makes motions with her hands to symbolize sound-letter correspondence. Sings A-Alley, B-Bubba, C-Catina, D-Deedee... Students are trying to mimic the teacher, however, they are falling behind. [Students are not understanding this--the teacher is going too fast.] Teacher says, “Let’s try it one more time.” More and more students are falling behind to the point where the majority are just looking around and bumping into each other. They look like bumper cars. These students cannot keep up with the song and hand motions. Teacher, “S is for Sammy Snake (making a slithering motion)... V is for Vinny Vampire (motioning with her hands to her mouth that she had vampire fangs)....W is Willie Weasel....” (Orosco, 2007)

## Tier 1 Example: First Grade

The whole Class is sitting in a circle, with the teacher seated at the head. Teacher says, “Yesterday, how many of you knew your sight words? One student speaks out, “One?” Another, “Three?” Teacher replies, “You are right. Three students were able to tell me their sight words. We need to practice these words; we are really behind. Every one of you should know these sight words by now. You need to practice these at home. Don’t you practice these at home?” Teacher says this with frustration in her face and voice. Teacher states, “Only those 3 students will be able to pull from the treasure chest.” ... Teacher begins sight words practice and holds up index cards with-*Big, My, See, Like, I, At, This, And, Up, Have, Too*. Students repeat sight words as Teacher holds up index cards. This is a repetitive process. She then holds up the word “Big” without saying anything. One student says the word “Big.” She holds up a another. “See.” The same student says the word again. She holds up the word “see” again and tells the student who knew the previous answer not to say anything. Pause. Another says “see.” She continues to go through this process with all the words, and says, “Okay guys, you need to practice these at home, you are not paying attention, you should have known these words by now.” (Orosco, 2007)

## Tier 2 Example

T., “Let’s work on our sight words.” She writes sight words on her dry erase board: *have, many, some*. T. reads the words and has students repeat them. Some students read the words without much difficulty; others do not say anything. T., “Okay, now can you guys use these words in a sentence? Who would like to try?” No takers. T., “Someone?” T. looks at a student across from her and says, “Pick a word and try.” The student is hesitant. T., “How about if I help you? Can you say this, *I have some snow*. Repeat (Spanglish).” The student seems to get the gist, “I hab... so...mo... s...no.” T., “Good. How about someone else? How about the word *many*?” Students hesitate. T., “Okay. Here is an example. *I have many friends*. Can you say this?” Student, “I...hab...ma...ni friend...z.” T., “Good. Next word. *Some*.” T. looks at another student and makes up a sentence, “*I have some toys*.” S. repeats... The teacher takes them back to class.

# Tier 3 Example

- The teacher has a master's degree in special education and has been teaching for about 20 years. She noted, "I teach LD by the book."
- 4 second-grade culturally and linguistically diverse students, all determined to have learning disabilities.



Teacher: “Boys and girls, we need to read our story, ‘Polar Bears’. We need to listen to see what color they are, where they live or what they eat.” Teacher directs students to look at the title page, asks what they think the book is about. No response. Teacher asks, “Are polar bears nice?” No response. Teacher begins to read: “Polar Bears live in the Arctic at the North Pole. The polar bear is a marine mammal... Polar bears are carnivores...” [OC: I wonder how many students know what a marine mammal is, or a carnivore.] ... As she is reading students are beginning to check out; one student is playing with the drawstring in his hooded sweater. Another two are whispering to each other. The teacher continues: “The white fur is important camouflage for the bears as they hunt their prey on the ice...”



[OC: What is camouflage? This story uses tough words for ESL students at this level. I wonder if the teacher knows whether these kids really understand this.] Teacher: “Okay let’s talk about the story now. So what do they smell?” No reply. Teacher, “Anyone?” One student, “People.” Teacher, “Good.” [This was not in the story.] Teacher, “Do polar bears live here in Colorado?” Students, “Yes.” Teacher, “Good. They could if they lived at the zoo.” [Colorado was not in the story.] ... Only one student is responding, with one word answers. [OC: I wonder if this book is too difficult for them. However, it would work for these kids if the language was modeled and sheltered for them...] (Orosco, 2007)



- Challenge 6: *School personnel do not understand the differences between learning to read in English as one's first language and learning to read in English as a second or additional language. They believe they can use the same methods and materials with all of their students.*





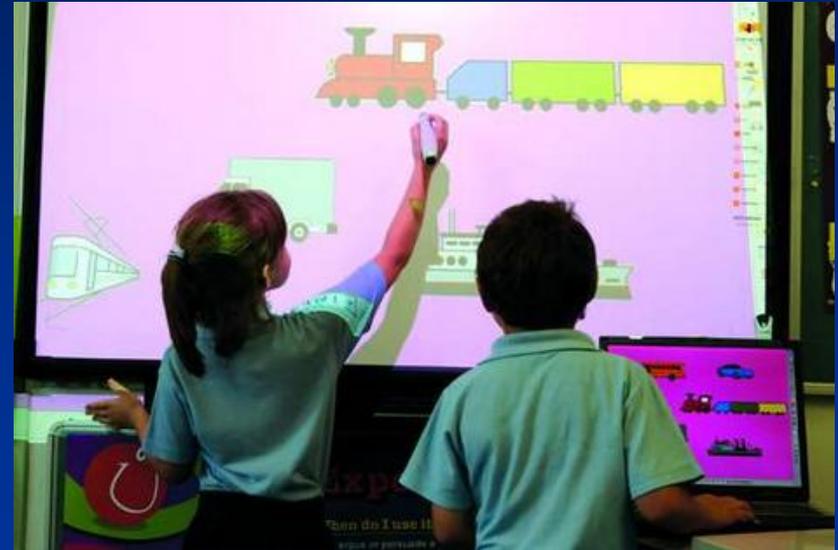
- Yet there are important differences between learning to read in one's L1 and L2 (August & Shanahan, 2006).
- Benchmarks and expected rates of progress may not be the same (Linan-Thompson, Cirino, & Vaughn, 2007).
- Some recommendations put too much emphasis on phonological awareness and letter naming at the expense of other skills, such as oral language, vocabulary, and comprehension.

- Challenge 7: *School personnel are not adequately prepared to teach culturally and linguistically diverse students or to distinguish between LD and learning differences. As the principal said, “They have the wrong master’s.”*

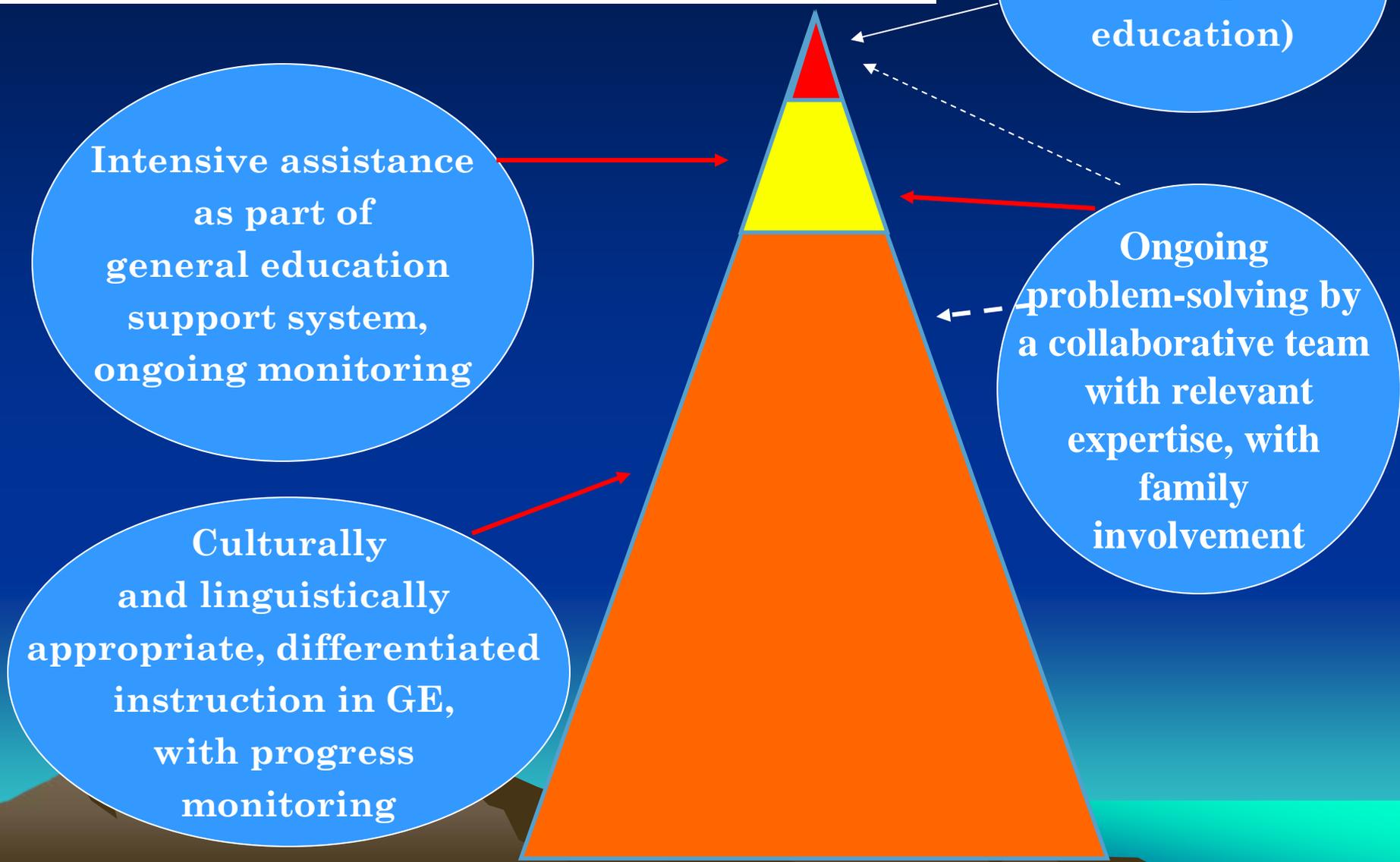


- Teacher education programs should prepare all pre-service teachers to work with culturally and linguistically diverse students.
  - State certification requirements should focus more on the competencies needed to teach English language learners.
- Professional development should be ongoing and should help teachers:
  - develop the attributes of culturally responsive teachers;
  - learn about second language acquisition and how to distinguish between language acquisition and learning disabilities; and
  - learn about instructional methods and assessment procedures for English language learners.

What do schools that successfully meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students look like?



# *A Culturally & Linguistically Appropriate RTI Model*



More intensive support (may be special education)

Intensive assistance as part of general education support system, ongoing monitoring

Ongoing problem-solving by a collaborative team with relevant expertise, with family involvement

Culturally and linguistically appropriate, differentiated instruction in GE, with progress monitoring

# Decision Points when Students Struggle with Reading

- How can teachers tell which students should receive additional interventions?
  - Look at how many students are struggling.
  - If the majority of students are making little progress, the teacher should focus on improving instruction.
  - If most students are doing well and only a few are struggling, the teacher should look more closely at what is going on with those individual students and consider that they may need additional support.

# Guiding Questions for RTI Teams

- When a child shows signs of struggling, the first step should be to observe in her classroom.
  - Is instruction targeted to and appropriate for the student's level of English proficiency and learning needs?
  - Is the teacher implementing appropriate research-based practices with fidelity?
    - If the teacher is modifying practices, for what reasons?
  - Does the classroom environment seem conducive to learning?
  - Are the student's "true peers" succeeding?
  - What can we conclude about the student's opportunity to learn?

- If most students in the class are thriving, the next step should be to collect student data:
  - Has consideration been given to the child's **cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, and experiential** background?
  - Have authentic assessments been used in addition to progress monitoring?
  - What tasks **can** the student perform and in what contexts?
  - Does the student differ from true peers in rate and level of learning?
  - Have the child's parents been asked for their input?



# In conclusion...



- RTI must be a comprehensive, school-wide approach, requiring:
  - coordinating curriculum and assessment considerations,
  - addressing teachers' professional development needs,
  - attending to school climate issues,
  - and enhancing leaders' capacities to orchestrate and respond to multiple (often contradictory) reforms (Adelman & Taylor).
- Sustained implementation of RTI will require strong leadership, collaboration among special educators, general educators, and families, and a well-established infrastructure (Burdette, 2007).

# Questions?

