RtI Update
What is the Problem?

By Chris Birr, MTSS/RtI Coordinator

A few months ago, I was in the audience at RTI Innovations listening to Dr. George Batsche. He posed the question, "What is the research base for MTSS?" After a pause, he stated "There is none, MTSS is a compilation of evidence based practices". At the time, I was grateful the question was rhetorical because initially, I was stumped. But Dr. Batsche made complete sense. MTSS is a framework designed to help schools prioritize resources and provide the most efficient and effective resources based on student needs. The success, or lack of success, of our students depends on the quality *and* fidelity of the instruction and interventions provided through our MTSS frameworks. But, if we fail to match high quality interventions to student needs, little benefit will be observed even with the highest level of fidelity. Correctly targeting student need is a necessary step toward providing the most effective instruction and intervention to students.

Fast forward from attending a conference with like-minded individuals to a team meeting in a school and you are likely to hear something similar to, "He was really struggling so we developed an intervention plan including: extra time, texts read aloud, and preferential seating". Teams have the best interest of students in mind but sometimes, solutions may be offered before a careful analysis of the problem is conducted. As school psychologists, we are knowledgeable about research, interventions, and measurement. But, time constraints, questions about who will deliver the intervention, or even availability of high quality interventions are common challenges. Plus, every week that passes, there are fewer weeks to make decisions using progress monitoring data. Starting a new intervention in April is not a pleasant situation. What can school psychologists do to efficiently *and* accurately begin the problem solving process?

Narrow the scope of the problem

School psychologists are often involved in meetings where the team is attempting to develop solutions. Despite knowing the problem solving process steps, little time is often dedicated to identifying why the problem may be occurring. Admittedly, there is a fine line between problem admiration and not spending enough time generating good solutions. Daly, Martens, Witt, and Dool (1997) developed five reasonable hypotheses for academic deficits. The hypotheses are that the student:

- Does not want to do it.
- Has not spent enough time practicing the task or skill
- Has not had enough help or instruction
- Has not had to complete the task that way before
- Is presented with a task that is too difficult

Using these hypotheses, school psychologists can ask questions leading to solutions that could be delivered by team members. For example, if the team determines a student does not want to engage in a task, brainstorming around desirable incentives could result in a plan where not only the student of concern but several other students are able to gain additional practice with opportunities to earn incentives. In a situation where seating is the selected strategy, school psychologists can ask questions such as how could the frequency of feedback be increased, what incentives could be provided, or are the expectations realistic?

Use the Instructional Hierarchy

Another way to select or narrow in on skills to intervene includes consideration of a student's skill development within the instructional hierarchy. The Instructional Hierarchy is applicable when discussing any skill (e.g. math problem solving, reading comprehension, social skills). The stages within the hierarchy are based on the work of Haring, Lovitt, Eaton, and Hansen conducted years ago but the theory holds up and is often helpful when defining the problem. The first stage is Acquisition where students respond slowly with frequent errors. This stage requires explicit instruction, supervision, and frequent targeted feedback. Before moving to the second stage, it is recommended that students demonstrate 90-95 percent response accuracy. If students have not adequately acquired the skill, providing independent practice and requiring automaticity will be frustrating and yield little to no benefit. The second stage is Fluency where students demonstrate a high level of accuracy but require more practice to increase automaticity. Again, 95 percent accuracy is the target along with increased speed when responding. Finally, students enter the Generalization and Adaptation stage where fluent skills are applied to solve different problems than those taught initially.

Often through the use of screening data, school psychologists can use the Instructional Hierarchy to generate intervention options based on stage of instruction. For example, if a student struggles decoding words, providing a fluency intervention such as Repeated Reading will not provide the necessary instruction resulting in frustration and a lack of expected response. Furthermore, a student who struggles to read fluently may struggle to make inferences about the text. More time practicing with feedback is warranted to ensure that the student develops the skill fluently with confidence.

What is the next step?

When it becomes clear intervention is needed, school psychologists can help guide teams to select Evidence Based Interventions aligned to need with evidence supporting use with . Citing the Evidence Based Intervention Network, "Evidence Based Interventions (EBI's) are treatments that have been proven effective (to some degree) through outcome evaluations. As such, EBI are treatments that are likely to be effective in changing target behavior if implemented with integrity." Most educators can identify broad areas of need for students such as reading, math, or behavior but more precision is needed to link EBI's to the hypothesized area of weakness. For example, a team may narrow in on fluency as a student's hypothesized problem but place the student in an intervention focused on comprehension due to capacity or availability of the intervention materials. Even with the best fidelity, addressing the wrong skill with an EBI will not provide adequate results. That is the reason many of us hear that a good intervention does not work. EBI's typically 'work', but have to be aligned to student need and level of instruction.

For additional EBI information from the Evidence Based Intervention Network:
http://ebi.missouri.edu/?page_id=52

When selecting EBI's, the following sites provide intervention reviews:

- Evidence Based Intervention Network: Interventions http://ebi.missouri.edu/?page_id=223
- How to Select an EBP, Evidence Based Intervention Network: http://ebi.missouri.edu/?page_id=402
- What Works Clearinghouse (WWC): https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Publication#/ContentTypeId:1
- National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) Tool Charts: http://www.intensiveintervention.org/tools-chart-resources
- Best Evidence Encyclopedia (BEE): http://www.bestevidence.org/

When using these resources, identify the characteristics of the sample group, the targeted level of instruction (e.g. fluency), and obtained outcomes of students in the studies. Although not always possible, attempts should be made to replicate the conditions where positive evidence was obtained using the intervention.

Conclusion

As this school year speeds by, problems may become more intense as does the need for effective and efficient intervention. During meetings or even hallway 'consultations', the impulse to leap to solutions is tempting. Having Daly's hypotheses or the Instructional Hierarchy in mind may help school psychologists guide conversations or ask the right questions to generate problem hypotheses. From there, school psychologists can help teams select targeted EBI's to maximize outcomes for students.

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References

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