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Multi-tiered System of Supports as Collective Work: a (Re)structuring Option for Middle Schools

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Abstract

Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) is the overarching referent for frameworks designed to target behavioral and academic challenges with a focus on a tiered continuum of evidence-based practices within the context of prevention science and implementation research (Freeman, Sugai, Simonsen, & Everett, 2017). Extensive literature indicates that MTSS programs can be effective in helping teachers address academic and behavioral challenges. However, from the onset of the RtI movement and through its transition into the MTSS paradigm, many middle level schools have faced significant organizational and systemic challenges which hamstring their ability to utilize MTSS programming with fidelity. This essay proposes an alternative framework for the implementation of MTSS programming at the middle level predicated in the theoretical construct of collective teacher efficacy. After reviewing the tenets of collective efficacy, a provision for framework of MTSS implementation is offered followed by discussion of both behaviors inherent to successful implementation and hallmarks of MTSS programming sustainability.

Keywords: MTSS, collective teacher efficacy, intervention, middle level

There he sat again. Alone – in the hallway. His piercing blue eyes, dimpled smile, and shaggy blonde hair swooped to the side, completed by a skater t-shirt and ripped jeans – a permanent fixture against the gray concrete of the school walls. As the stone cinder block pattern repeated, consuming the grey carpet and merging into the white paneled ceilings, the dull and mundane design was broken only by this figure who routinely sat crumpled on the floor.

Almost calculably, Matthew *[name changed for privacy]* would be perched outside classroom doors nearly every hour of every class period of every day, waiting for the teacher to exit into the hall and discuss the inappropriate comments or behaviors which had landed him against the wall yet again. Although he was in trouble, he was never volatile, never rude. In fact, he often smiled at passersby, engaging a polite ritual of "Hellos" and "How are you's?" It made little sense; he was expected to be in the halls, waiting for his re-entry conversation, anticipating consequence. But his demeanor was not one of a student in trouble; that would have been too solvable, too predictable. Behind his blue eyes was a story with a multitude of layers.

This narrative is not novel. U. S. American middle schools have become increasingly complex spaces where students exhibit dramatic, wide-ranging academic and social needs. Students like this exist in most every educational context, and although determining a scholarly consensus for the definition of his varied needs, Natriellos' (2002) depiction of "at-risk," or those "with a greater than average chance of not succeeding in school" is apropos (p. 49). As a result, the protean susceptibility of influence from peers, parents, schools, media, and culture render the educators' call of duty toward these students far beyond that of mere transmitter of information or traditional facilitator of classroom. The responsibilities of schools and educators to provide systems of support for all students' needs has never been more heightened, particularly when variables like absenteeism, low academic performance, problematic classroom behaviors, and widely discrepant resources are at play (Foley and Pang, 2006).

Educational policy has attempted to answer the burgeoning questions associated with schools' responsibilities to problem-solve these discrepancies (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002). Policy mandates have served as a catalyst for educational reform, resulting in the emergence of school-wide frameworks like Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). According to Eagle, Dowd-Eagle, Snyder, & Holtzman (2015), "given the strong alignment of key features of RtI and PBIS, increasing attention has been placed on the need for an integrated model that braids initiatives for academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs into a single Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS)" (p. 161). Thus, MTSS has become the modern, multi-faceted reform effort predicated in theoretical and practical considerations designed to elicit a preventative, decision-making, problem-solving, evidence-based framework which addresses the interconnectedness of academic and behavioral difficulties (Nelson, Benner, Lane, & Smith, 2004).

In theory, MTSS should emerge as a safeguard for all students.

However, deficient implementation of a clear, purposeful, and focused multi-tiered approach to intervention in most middle level schools has continuously failed those students who sit against their cinder block walls, waiting for inconsequential methods of "discipline" or academic support. There are many potential culprits for this ineffectiveness: layers of incongruent and inefficient systems, scant staffing resources, disproportionate professional development related to the MTSS process, and the overwhelmingly variant needs of middle level learners (Scott, Gage, Hirn, et. al, 2019; Bouck & Cosby, 2019; Nagro, Hooks, & Fraser, 2018). The lack of a clear MTSS directive in many of the United States' middle level schools is a

pronounced reminder of the work to be done to provide equitable opportunity for all students. To answer this call, this essay proposes an alternative pathway to the implementation of MTSS programming at the middle level predicated in a progressive theoretical construct which may serve to capture not only the intended essence of MTSS, but may also improve the working culture of U.S. American middle schools creating a re-energized and inspired context in which to serve.

Hamstrung: Limitations of organizational structures

Although represented in varied ways, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) became the overarching referent for frameworks designed to proactively target behavioral and academic challenges with a focus on emphasizing a tiered continuum of evidence-based practices within the context of prevention science and implementation research (Freeman, Sugai, Simonsen, & Everett, 2017). Extensive literature indicates that MTSS programs can be effective in helping teachers address academic and behavioral challenges in contemporary classrooms (e.g. Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009; Landers, Courtade, & Ryndak, 2012). The goal of MTSS is to create a student-centered, formative framework that uses preventative problem-solving and evidence-based practices to address difficulties among students (Hunter, Maheady, Jasper, Williamson, Murley, & Stratton, 2015).

MTSS programming also aligns with current research surrounding best practice for middle level education, echoing many of the sentiments expressed in the landmark position paper *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* published by the National Middle School Association (now the Association for Middle Level Education) in 2010. *This We Believe* asserts that middle level education must be developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable. Organizing 16 research-based characteristics of effective middle level education into three areas: curriculum, instruction, and assessment; leadership and organization; and culture and community, this framework supports initiatives correlating to the premises of MTSS such as encouragement of family-school partnerships, use of on-going assessment and measurement, provision of comprehensive support services, creation of an inviting and inclusive environment, annual professional development for all staff, and commitment to research-based best practices (National Middle School Association, 2010).

Thus, in theory, MTSS intervention programs should build teachers' capacity to reach varied learners. This occurs by utilizing Tier 1 instructional practices that are beneficial for all students or Tier 2 grouping practices allowing for concentrated remediation and/or enrichment opportunities. When students need additional intensive support, MTSS should allow for a Tier 3 strategic, progress-monitored plan to be created with the support of a team of teachers, specialists, and a connection to the home. In this theoretical vein, MTSS would be embodied dually; first, as a set of teaching principles which guide the pedagogy of all teachers in relation to all students, and second, as a systematic approach to offering additional support to individual students and groups of students with similar high-level needs.

However, theory is only beneficial insofar as it can be actualized.

Sansosti and Noltemeyer (2008) argue that schools must emphasize conditions that build capacity of both the system (school) and the individuals (educators) who work within the system. From the onset of the RtI movement and through its transition into the MTSS paradigm, many middle level schools have faced significant organizational and systemic challenges which hamstring their ability to utilize the MTSS program with fidelity. Not only have district and national policies created turbulent and high-reaching sets of expectations with scant resource allocation, but as skeptical stakeholders, middle school teachers are often not afforded

opportunities to create generative space for the new directions suggested by or demanded by MTSS. Unfortunately, systematic school and district-wide reforms are often complicated or even derailed by competing or non-integrated initiatives, insufficient resources, lack of leadership, inadequate professional development or coaching, misalignment between practice and need, and lack of differentiated support (Fixen, Blasé, Metz, & Van Dyke, 2013). This story is not novel, and students have been displaced for too long.

Integrating theories of collective efficacy

As demonstrated, facilitating meaningful and sustainable systems-level change related to MTSS is a "complex process" requiring an understanding of evidence-based programs and effective implementation practices, executed through an interdisciplinary approach (Fixen, Naoom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Eagle, et al., 2015, p. 162). To answer this call, theories of collective teacher efficacy emerge as a potential foundation for building a response to the problem of inefficient and insufficient middle level MTSS programming.

A collective, systematic approach

Principles of collective teacher efficacy (CTE) represent a new potential theoretical underpinning for the MTSS process. When educators "believe together that they and their colleagues can impact student achievement, they share a sense of collective teacher efficacy" (Donohoo, 2017, p. 3). Harnessing this agency exercised through socially coordinated and interdependent efforts is a practice related to Bandura's social cognition theory whereby a "premium" is placed on collective efficacy as a means through which to exercise "control over destinies" (2001, p. 1; 1997). Collective teacher efficacy is an emerging construct describing the "perceptions of teachers in a school that the efforts of the faculty as a whole will have a positive effect on students" (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000, p. 480; Donohoo, 2017). In other words, collective teacher efficacy underscores the collective belief of the staff to positively affect students.

While numerous studies have historically emphasized the powerful role of individual teacher efficacy and its positive impact on schools and students (Chung, et al., 2010), recent research has evaluated the impact of collective teacher efficacy. Hattie's work on visible learning cites collective teacher efficacy as the single most significant factor influencing student achievement, boasting a notable effect size of 1.57 (Hattie, 2012, 2016). Hattie (2016) claims that a school staff who believes it can collectively accomplish great things is vital to the health of the school. CTE promotes a sense of shared responsibility likely to improve teacher morale and thereby, effectiveness. Collective teacher efficacy is also related to achievement because an empowered sense of group capability establishes cultural norms for success and encourages its members to work resiliently toward these desired ends (Goddard, Hoy & Hoy, 2000; Suh, 2017). Utilizing this paradigm, middle schools should shift their MTSS process to a collective approach where years of faculty experience and expertise are harnessed as a resource.

Logistics of collective MTSS work

With this theoretical foundation in place, the following describes an approach to MTSS grounded in theories of collective efficacy. This approach was first implemented during the 2017-2018 academic year in a large middle school in central Colorado serving sixth through eighth graders. After site administrators were introduced to a professional development agenda including the study of collective efficacy, faculty members became interested in applying this macro concept to specific aspects of school systems (such as MTSS), a move also corroborated by Hattie's (2016) research. After one year of implementation at this site, the framework became a focal point of district-wide conversation after its success. Subsequent neighboring

middle schools expressed interest in adopting various features of this framework and continuing collaborative relationships to refine the process which is described next.

First, to promote a collaborative, shared approach to problem-solving that does not necessitate additional staffing or encroach upon teacher's personal time, middle schools should focus MTSS work during one of the only allotted periods of time where all staff gather together: staff meetings. For this dedicated time to be valuable, prior to staff meetings, individual teachers or teacher teams can complete a simple snapshot profile housed on a schools' main server. This profile provides teachers the opportunity to document key challenges associated with a student of concern, document student strengths and interests, document pertinent testing data or baseline scoring, and identify any strategies that have been utilized in relation to pedagogy, curriculum, assessment of student learning, student engagement, or classroom culture (Five Dimensions of Teaching and Learning, University of Washington, 2015). All snapshot profiles can be delivered to a site MTSS coordinator who will complement the initial work by reviewing cumulative files, discipline files, conduct informal observations of students in situ, and add relevant notes to the snapshot profiles.

During staff meetings, a site coordinator can initiate the MTSS process by offering a brief mini-lesson for 5-7 minutes designed to build staff knowledge and skill around small components of the MTSS process such as: modeling simple Tier 1 intervention strategies all teachers can integrate, sharing evidence-based practices related to specific groups of learners, or highlighting tools that can be utilized for functional behavior assessment. With consistent, monthly exposure to small pieces of professional development, staff members will participate in a collective experience of growing and refining MTSS capacity bit by bit over time.

After the mini-lesson, staff members can group into interdisciplinary teams representing multiple grade levels and content areas. Each team can receive a copy of one of the snapshot profiles and spend 15-20 minutes discussing the student in question, adding any pertinent information to the profile, and building a list of potential interventions that might be applicable. This process allows the collective experience and expertise of staff members to be honored by recognizing that when working together, they can create solutions that will be meaningful and efficacious. Further, it alleviates the burdens voluntary MTSS committees or lone ranger MTSS coordinators may feel by instead promoting the expectation that *all* staff members are part of the MTSS process, *all* staff members have a shared responsibility toward student success, and *all* staff members should build evolving toolboxes of interventions. To illustrate, with a staff of 50 licensed teachers breaking into interdisciplinary groups of 7-10 teachers, it is plausible that five or six snapshot profiles could be evaluated in the course of one staff meeting, increasing the number of students who may potentially be served through the MTSS process.

After the staff brainstorming session is complete, an MTSS coordinator will collect profiles and then work directly with referring teachers or teams to develop goals and interventions based on the suggestions provided by the collective brainstorming session. This expedites the speed through which students can be served and alleviates the responsibility of a small committee or individual interventionist trying to create goals for a student who is likely unknown to most. It also provides a siphoning process through which staff members can judiciously discern if MTSS is the appropriate pathway for a student concern or if another strategy may be more suitable. Snapshot profiles also provide a productive problem-solving template through which to engage communication about student concerns and set the foundation for the data that may eventually be documented in district student information systems.

In totality, by creating a school-wide form of documentation for addressing student concerns, moving MTSS into a dedicated monthly or weekly session where all staff brainstorm together, launching sessions by providing small-scale professional development opportunities to

grow staff capacity, and engaging theories of collective efficacy by relying upon shared experience, expertise, and responsibility as a source of problem-solving, middle levels contexts may slowly begin to move closer to the mission of educating all children equitably.

Moreover, staff frustration will alleviate because a system with clear steps and high levels of accountability affords teachers a formalized pathway for raising student concerns. By working together as a staff to learn the stories of students who may be struggling, all students become the responsibility of all teachers, uniting teachers in a common purpose and a shared vision, thus improving morale. With a universal snapshot profile template existing and accessible, teachers have a mutual form of documentation and can use this documentation to foster meaningful conversations about students versus simply engaging informal complaint sessions. Finally, by focusing the role of the MTSS site coordinator into a facilitator model, staff capacity will slowly be built, and Tier 1 interventions will become the norm of daily classroom activity, thus bolstering teacher effectiveness, too.

Enacting change: Behaviors necessitated for implementation

Systems change is a messy process. At times educational contexts exist at the edge of chaos, and educators must boldly navigate this chaos to realize school improvement and bolster student achievement (Brown & Moffett, 1999; Sharratt & Fullan, 2009). For a framework such as the one proposed to be successful, school reform efforts require the development of a collaborative culture and a strong team (Waldron and McLeskey, 2010). Building the capacity of school faculty and staff is a priority endeavor. By arriving at a shared vision and awarding autonomy to work within that vision, an MTSS framework such as the one suggested can be actualized when honoring the following behaviors (Dulaney, Hallam, & Wall, 2013).

To unroot the years of absent or de-prioritized MTSS programs, it will first be imperative that an interdisciplinary school leadership team is formed dedicated to the spirit and intent of the proposed goal: utilizing collective teacher efficacy toward shared responsibility and mentality of collaborative intervention. Leadership teams must believe in and understand the value of developing collective efficacy and be willing to dedicate time toward a collaborative understanding of these concepts. This will nurture a sense of momentum by engaging the whole staff in a shared vision of student achievement. Building collective efficacy can repair school culture, rebuild trust, and ignite a renewed sense of purpose that may have been lost through transitions in leadership, ongoing changes in federal and district policy, or a lack of a clear system through which to access support for struggling students.

A second key behavior necessitated to ensure this process will be effective is consistency. It is easy to jump on the educational bandwagon in support of various trends or initiatives, and then abandon processes as emergent issues arise, the daily work of education becomes busy, and/or new trends are introduced. Without devoting a consistent length of time to the process and honoring the established routines, it will be difficult to discern its effectiveness and have a body of evidence around which to judge the impact of the program. All staff members must remain steadfast in the commitment to a consistent MTSS protocol. In doing so, educators operating within MTSS become part of a system that supports high functioning PLCs that have at their core RtI practices of problem solving and data-driven decision-making practices. When honored appropriately, these processes become engrained in school cultures and inform daily classroom practice and the way in which educators relate to one another (Dulaney, Hallam, & Wall, 2013). As culture improves, school leadership teams must then strive to work at the forefront of the movement, accessing current research on MTSS practices, collaborating with other district sites to ascertain what processes are being used and what can be gleaned from

them, and staying abreast of pertinent state or federal mandates that may impact teachers' daily work.

Finally, administrative staff must use decision-making authority around the allocation of resources, including those related to finances, building space, and personnel. How resources are divided "among competing interests and needs impacts the potential investment of faculty and staff toward MTSS initiatives" (Eagle et al., 2015, p. 166). Financial resources relate to professional development, cost of curricula, data management systems, supplies, and staffing allocation. Space remains a premium, and administrators can systematically support MTSS by providing adequate locations for professional development, dedicated areas for student support, technologically sufficient areas for team meetings and MTSS activities like data entry and check-in/check-out. Principals possess knowledge of technical and adaptive leadership techniques and may utilize their social and professional influence around these resources to achieve meaningful change (Eagle, et al., 2015).

By believing in the vision of collective teacher efficacy, providing autonomy to enact the vision, championing a consistent long-term process, and raising the bar for PLCs, middle level educators will make a strategic difference in the lives of many students.

Monitoring and evaluating change: Toward sustainability

To evaluate the effectiveness of the change, one of the most significant factors of consideration is sustainability. As noted by Ross & Bruce (2007), teacher efficacy at both the individual and collective level consistently predicts a host of "enabling teacher beliefs, functional teacher behaviors, and valued student outcomes" (p. 50). These predictors of success are the greatest link to sustainability for a systematic academic change.

To exemplify, when an entire staff dedicates monthly time to learning about collective teacher efficacy, practicing and embodying the dimensions of collective teacher efficacy, and utilizing this knowledge toward the creation of a school-wide MTSS, the sustainability of this learning becomes be embedded in the culture and values of the school context. As a result, hallmarks of collective teacher efficacy will be visible in the norms of middle schools, the relationships among colleagues, and according to research, student achievement (Hattie, 2016). With a staggering effect size of 1.57, Hattie (2016) argues that educators with high efficacy demonstrate greater effort and persistence, a willingness to engage new approaches and set challenging goals and attend more closely to the needs of students who require extra assistance. These indicators will be visible embodiments of sustainability, permeating and informing the school context. Over time, this sustainability and program success should be measurable in student achievement and growth, as schools can look forward to a slow yet steady increase in student performance outcomes, particularly in relation to subpopulations who have historically struggled.

Another way to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of this proposed change is to utilize staff feedback. By viewing middle level contexts as action research sites and individual MTSS interventions as case studies, valuable perspective on sustainability and impact of the initiative can be gained. Through both formal and informal discussions, parent feedback, and annual surveys, data can be gathered about the process and its evolution. Check-in points can be orchestrated throughout implementation phases where staff members might offer, suggest changes to the process, request specific professional development, or ask questions for clarification. This form of engagement suggests staff buy-in, another indicator of program achievement. Staff buy-in and support functions as a revealing narrative regarding the effect of

redefined MTSS processes if the integration and institutionalization of MTSS practices becomes routine or the "way of doing things," and the implementation of the program serves a model for the implementation of other school-wide reforms.

To exemplify, in reference to the aforementioned site and district where this framework has been applied in the previous two academic years, utilization of the MTSS process has increased exponentially. Dramatic shifts in staff willingness to enter students into the MTSS process are visible alongside clear attempts to utilize Tier 1 strategies based on the mini lessons provided to staff. Detailed documentation regarding student profiles and plans are accessible and staff capacity regarding the identification of student needs and application of fitting interventions is growing. Most importantly, staff morale has improved as colleagues have adopted a mentality of teamwork and mutual accountability.

Conclusions: MTSS – a system enacted by all, for all

The continued philosophical, political, and practical impetus for MTSS reform renews interest in system-level organization and the roles that both educational leaders and teachers undertake within these initiatives. When utilized appropriately, MTSS advocates for data-based decision-making, universal screening of all students, implementation of evidence-based interventions at multiple tiers, and ongoing progress monitoring to inform the decisions at each tier – practices which foster a strong school culture and higher student achievement (Eagle et al., 2015).

The preceding outlines the difficulties many middle schools have weathered over the past decade to articulate a vision for MTSS, providing resources necessary for its implementation, and shifting school culture to accommodate foundational systemic MTSS principles. As a result, many middle schools have lagged in their development of multi-tiered system of supports. The consequence of this delinquency: staff and administrators allow repetitious behavior infractions to reign as the norm and develop an attitude of indifference toward struggling students, with many faculty members citing that systemic problems were too large to allow for meaningful impact on individual cases. Sadly, MTSS can become merely a vague construct passed off as "extra work," and a vicious cycle may ensue.

This proposed theoretical foundation seeks to address the problem through a hopeful series of steps based on current research regarding collective efficacy, coupled with a pragmatic approach that honors educators' time, talent, and expertise. Not only is this solution aimed at helping struggling students, but it also attempts to build staff morale, increase trust and communication between staff and administrators, and foreground collaborative, collective efforts as the cultural norm. It is for these reasons, and the hundreds other reasons that walk through the doors of our nation's middle schools each morning, this problem must be addressed immediately. It is for the students. It is for their families. It is for Matthew.

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