Implementing Response to Intervention in Context

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Abstract

Response to intervention is meant to be broad-based and preventative. However, as formulated and practiced the approach often is too limited in how it frames what needs to go on to enable learning, engage students, and keep them engaged. In particular, it pays too little attention to the need to strengthen the classroom and schoolwide context in ways that enhance the effectiveness of response to intervention. This brief highlights ways to transform the context for implementing response to intervention. The emphasis is on a sequential classroom approach that personalizes instruction, then, if necessary, pursues specialized interventions in a hierarchical manner. Moreover, classroom interventions are understood as embedded in a comprehensive and systemic schoolwide framework for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students.

Implementing Response to Intervention in Context

Response to Intervention (RTI) initiatives wisely underscore the unacceptability of waiting for students to fail. However, as with so many other efforts intended to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school, this budding movement often is pursued as just another piecemeal effort. Fragmentary endeavors cannot address the complex realities confronting teachers and student support staff.

Concern about supporting the RTI movement led the U.S. Department of Education to fund a technical assistance center, the *National Center on Response to Intervention*, involving the American Institutes for Research and researchers from Vanderbilt University and the University of Kansas (http://www.rti4success.org/). Clearly the RTI center increasingly will shape how response to intervention is implemented. So we begin by noting the ways in which that center defines and frames response to intervention, and we highlight some concerns about the lack of emphasis on context.

The RTI center stresses that "the purpose of RTI is to provide all students with the best opportunities to succeed in school, identify students with learning or behavioral problems, and ensure that they receive appropriate instruction and related supports." This purpose is translated into a definition that states "response to intervention integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavior problems. With RTI, schools identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student's responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities or other disabilities."

A center guidebook describes four essential components of response to intervention as (1) a school-wide, multi-level instructional and behavioral system for preventing school failure, (2) screening, (3) progress monitoring, and (4) data-based decision making for instruction, movement within the multi-level system, and disability identification (in accordance with state law). The guidebook also states response to intervention is "a framework for providing comprehensive support to students and is not an instructional practice" and that "RTI is a prevention oriented approach to linking assessment and instruction that can inform educators' decisions about how best to teach their students."

As formulated by the RTI center, the emphasis is meant to be broad-based and preventative, but the approach described is too limited in how it frames what needs to go on in a classroom and schoolwide to enable learning, engage students, and keep them engaged. For response to intervention to be highly effective, significant changes are needed with respect to how administrators, teachers, student support staff, and other key stakeholders transform those schools where a significant proportion of students lack enthusiasm about attendance and about engaging in the day's lesson plans. This is especially the case in schools where many students have become disengaged from classroom instruction, are behaving in disruptive ways, and are dropping out. To facilitate the success of such students at school, staff must enable them to (1) get around interfering barriers and (2) (re)engage in classroom instruction. Properly designed, response to intervention strategies can help with all this if they are embedded into the larger agenda for transforming classroom and schoolwide approaches in ways that ensure equity of opportunity for all students to succeed at a given school.

Our center at UCLA stresses that major breakthroughs in countering students' learning, behavior, and emotional problems can be achieved only when school improvement policy, planning, implementation, and accountability *comprehensively* address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students. One major facet of this involves redesigning and transforming a wide range of regular classroom strategies to enable learning. It is this facet that is the main focus of this brief.

Specifically, the following discussion highlights response to intervention in the context of the classroom and as a sequential and hierarchical approach for all students. At the same time, it emphasizes that classroom efforts to enhance equity of opportunity must be embedded within a comprehensive schoolwide system of student and learning supports.

Response to Intervention in the Classroom Context

For response to intervention to become an effective facet in classrooms, teachers and student support personnel need to work together to transform classrooms. This begins with:

- Opening the classroom door (a) to bring in more help (e.g., volunteers trained to work with students-in-need; resource teachers and student support staff to team up with the teacher in the classroom) and (b) to facilitate personalized professional development
- Ensuring what goes on in the classroom (and schoolwide) establishes and maintains a stimulating, caring, and supportive climate
- Redesigning classroom strategies to enhance teacher capability to prevent and handle problems and reduce the need for out of class referrals (e.g. personalizing instruction; expanding the range of curricular and instructional options and choices; systematic use of pre-referral interventions, response to intervention, and in class special assistance; turning big classes into smaller units; reducing over-reliance on social control)

Opening the Classroom Door: Moving Toward Stimulating, Caring, and Supportive Classrooms

Opening the classroom door allows for many forms of assistance, mentoring, partnership, and other collegial practices.

Teachers, especially new teachers, need as much in-classroom support and personalized on-the-job education as can be provided. All teachers need to learn more about how to enable learning among students, especially those with problems. All school staff need support from each other in enhancing outcomes for such students. Given their shared agenda, it seems evident that staff not only should work closely with each other, but also with parents, volunteers, professionals-in- training, and so forth. And, a large part of the work should take place in the classroom.

Using Aides and Volunteers in Targeted Ways

Every teacher has had the experience of planning a wonderful lesson and having the class disrupted by one or two unengaged students (who often are more interested in interacting with a classmate than pursuing the lesson). The first tendency usually is to use some simple form of social control to stop the disruptive behavior (e.g., using proximity and/or a mild verbal intervention). Because so many students today are not easily intimidated, teachers often find such strategies don't work. So, the control efforts are escalated. The teacher reprimands, warns, and finally sends the student to "time-out" or to the front office for discipline. In the process, the other students start to titter about what is happening and learning is disrupted.

In contrast to this scenario, teachers can train qualified volunteers to work in ways that help all concerned by minimizing disruptions and re-engaging an errant student. The objective is to train volunteers to watch for and move quickly at the first indication that a student needs special guidance and support. For instance, a volunteer is taught to go and sit next to the student and quietly try to re-engage the youngster in the lesson. If this proves undoable, the volunteer takes the student to a quiet area in the classroom and initiates another type of activity or, if necessary and feasible, goes out for a brief walk. It is true that this means the student won't get the benefit of instruction during that period, but s/he wouldn't anyway.

None of this is a matter of rewarding student bad behavior. Rather, it is a strategy for avoiding the tragedy of disrupting the whole class while the teacher reprimands the culprit and in the process increases that student's negative attitudes toward teaching and school. This use of a volunteer allows teaching to continue, and as soon as time permits, it makes it possible for staff to explore with the student ways to make the classroom a mutually satisfying place to be. Moreover, by handling the matter in this way, the teacher is likely to find the student more receptive to discussing things than if the usual "logical consequences" have been administered (e.g., loss of privileges, sending the student to time-out or to the assistant principal).

Using this approach and not having to shift into a discipline mode has multiple benefits. For one, the teacher is able to carry out the day's lesson plan. For another, the other students do not have the experience of seeing the teacher having a control contest with a student. (Even if the teacher wins such contests, it may have a negative effect on how students perceive them; and if the teacher somehow "loses it," that definitely conveys a wrong message. Either outcome can be counterproductive with respect to a caring climate and a sense of community.) Finally, the teacher has not had a negative encounter with the targeted student. Such encounters build up negative attitudes on both sides which can be counterproductive with respect to future teaching, learning, and behavior. Because there has been no negative encounter, the teacher can reach out to the student after the lesson is over and start to think about how to use an aide or volunteers to work with the student to prevent future problems.

For more on volunteers as an invaluable resource, see Addendum A.

Collaboration and teaming are key facets of (1) addressing barriers to learning and teaching and (2) promoting engagement, learning, performance, and healthy development. For instance, an open classroom door allows student support staff to do much more than "consult" with teachers (e.g., go beyond just recommending what teachers should do about student behavior, learning, and emotional problems). Of course, before support staff can go into classrooms to team with teachers, they must learn much more about classroom life and teaching. And, they must especially learn about what it takes to engage and re-engage students in instruction.

Promoting a Positive School and Classroom Climate

It is evident that how classrooms are arranged and how instruction is organized helps or hinders learning and teaching and affects behavior. Opening the classroom door must be paired with interventions that ensure those who enter are welcomed and supported. What goes on in the classroom is designed to promote personalized and holistic learning and minimize learning, behavior, and emotional problems. When a problem does arise, it is addressed immediately with response to intervention strategies (including a range of what tend to be called "prereferral" interventions).

The ideal is to have an environment where students and teachers feel positively stimulated, well-supported, and engaged in pursuing the learning objectives of the day. Student engagement is especially important in preventing problems. Thus, minimally, classroom practices must enhance motivation to learn and facilitate active learning and do so in ways that promote a climate and culture of mutual caring and respect (see Addendum B).

Simply stated, active learning is *learning by doing, listening, looking, and asking;* but it is not just being active that counts. It is the mobilization of the student to seek out and learn. Specific activities are designed to capitalize on student interests and curiosity, involve them in problem solving and guided inquiry, and elicit their thinking through reflective discussions and appropriate products. Moreover, the activities can be designed to do all this in ways that minimize threats to and enhance feelings of competence, self-determination, and relatedness to others (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002; Deci & Moller, 2005; National Research Council, 2004).

There are many examples of ways to facilitate active learning at all grade levels. It can take the form of class discussions, problem-based and discovery learning, a project approach, involvement in "learning centers" at school, experiences outside the classroom, and independent learning in or out of school. Obviously, computers and the internet can be valuable tools in all this.

Stimulating, caring, and supportive classrooms do much more than motivate learning of subject matter and academic skills. They provide conditions for social and emotional learning. Students learn to cooperate, share responsibility, develop understanding and skills related to conflict resolution and mediation, and much more. For staff, such classrooms provide a context for collaborating with colleagues and with a variety of volunteers to ensure mutual support and counter staff burn out. The mental health implications of all this are clear.

Stimulating, caring, and supportive classrooms promote academic achievement and social, and emotional learning

Analyses of practice and research suggest that a proactive approach to developing positive school and classroom climates requires careful attention to (1) enhancing the quality of life at school and especially in the classroom for students and staff, (2) pursuing a curriculum that promotes not only academic, but also social, and emotional learning, (3) enabling teachers and other staff to be effective with a wide range of students, and (4) fostering intrinsic motivation for learning and teaching. With respect to all this, the literature advocates

- a welcoming, caring, and hopeful atmosphere
- social support mechanisms for students and staff
- an array of options for pursuing goals
- meaningful participation by students and staff in decision making
- transforming the classroom infrastructure from a big classroom into a set of smaller units organized to maximize intrinsic motivation for learning and not based on ability or problem-oriented grouping
- providing instruction and responding to problems in a personalized way
- use of a variety of strategies for preventing and addressing problems as soon as they arise
- a healthy and attractive physical environment that is conducive to learning and teaching.

For any school, a welcoming induction and ongoing support are critical elements both in creating a positive sense of

community and in facilitating staff and student school adjustment and performance. School-wide strategies for welcoming and supporting staff, students, and families at school *every day* are part of creating a mentally healthy school – one where staff, students, and families interact positively with each other and identify with the school and its goals.

> *What small, personalized learning communities can do is (1) minimize school-related barriers, (2) ensure a range of learning and teaching opportunities, and (3) provide a comprehensive system of learning supports that enables a school to facilitate productive learning in a caring context.*

Redesigning Classroom Strategies

The old adage: *Meet learners where they are* captures the commonsense view of good classroom practices. Unfortunately, this adage often is interpreted only as a call for *matching* a student's current *capabilities* (e.g., knowledge and skills). The irony, of course, is that most school staff know that motivational factors (e.g., attitudes) play a key role in poor instructional outcomes. One of the most frequent laments about students is: "They could do it, if only they *wanted* to!"

We all also know that good abilities are more likely to emerge when students are motivated not only to pursue assignments, but also are interested in using what they learn. The point for emphasis is that good classroom practices involve matching *motivation* (especially *intrinsic* motivation), and this often involves overcoming *avoidance* motivation (Adelman & Taylor, 2006a, b; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Deci & Moller, 2005).

With respect to facilitating learning, the desire to meet learners where they are sometimes is referred to as the concept of the "match" or the problem of "fit." Schools strive to design instruction that fits, but the reality is that they can only approximate an optimal fit. And, a close approximation probably requires *personalizing instruction*.

Personalization. For some time, efforts to improve instructional fit in the classroom have revolved around the concepts of individualized or personalized instruction. The two concepts overlap in emphasizing developmental differences. That is, most *individualized* approaches stress individual differences in developmental capability. *Personalization,* however, is defined as the process of accounting for individual differences in *both capability* and *motivation*.

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Personalization needs to be understood as a psychological construct. From a motivational perspective, the *learner's perception* is a critical factor in defining whether the environment is a good fit. Given this, it is important to ensure learning opportunities are *perceived by learners* as good ways to reach their goals. Thus, a basic assessment concern is that of eliciting learners' perceptions of how well what is offered matches both their interests and abilities.

Outlined in Exhibit 1 are underlying assumptions and major elements of personalized classrooms. Properly designed and carried out, personalizing instruction can be sufficient in facilitating classroom learning for most students, and this reduces the need for specialized assistance.

Personalizing regular classroom programs also can improve the effectiveness of prevention, inclusion, and prereferral interventions. In such classrooms, personalization represents a regular classroom application of the principle of using the least intervention necessary to be effective (which encompasses the concept of "least restrictive environment").

From a motivational perspective, enhancing motivation is a fundamental concern with respect to response to intervention. (Students who don't *want* to perform always will look as if they have significant skills deficits.)

Those helping teachers learn to implement response to intervention can contribute greatly to transforming classrooms by helping ensure that motivation is addressed as a primary consideration. Instruction should be based on an appreciation of what is likely to affect a student's positive and negative motivation to learn (Vansteenkiste, Lens, & Deci, 2006). Among the fundamental intervention implications are ensuring that classrooms offer a broad range of content, outcome, and procedural *options,* including a personalized structure to facilitate learning. With real options comes real opportunities for *involving learners in decision making*. A motivational focus also stresses development of nonthreatening ways to provide information about learning and performance.

Many instructional approaches are effective when a student is motivated to learn what is being taught. And, for students with learning, behavior, and emotional problems, motivation for classroom learning often is the primary concern. The seeds of significant problems are planted when instruction is not a good fit. For example, learning problems generate an emotional

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Exhibit 1

Underlying Assumptions and Major Program Elements of a Personalized Program

I. *Underlying Assumptions*

The following are basic assumptions underlying personalized programs as we conceive them.

• Learning is a function of the ongoing transactions between the learner and the learning environment.

• Optimal learning is a function of an optimal match between the learner's accumulated capacities and attitudes and current state of being and the program's processes and context.

• Matching both learner motivation and capacities must be primary procedural objectives.

• The learner's perception is the critical criterion for evaluating whether a good match or fit exists between the learner and the learning environment.

• The wider the range of options that can be offered and the more the learner is made aware of the options and has a choice about which to pursue, the greater the likelihood that he or she will perceive the match as a good one.

• Besides improved learning, personalized programs enhance intrinsic valuing of learning and a sense of personal responsibility for learning. Furthermore. such programs increase acceptance and even appreciation of individual differences, as well as independent and cooperative functioning and problem solving.

II. *Program Elements*

Major elements of personalized programs as we have identified them are:

• turning large classes into small units (many small group and individual learning opportunities – see Addendum C)

• in-classroom collaboration and teaming

• regular use of informal and formal conferences for discussing options, making decisions, exploring learners' perceptions, and mutually evaluating progress;

• a broad range of options from which learners can make choices with regard to types of learning content, processes, needed support and guidance, and desired outcomes;

• active decision making by learners in making choices (with appropriate guidance and support) and in evaluating how well the chosen options match their motivation and capability;

• establishment of program plans and mutual agreements about the ongoing relationships between the learners and the program personnel;

• regular reevaluations of decisions, reformulation of plans, and renegotiation of agreements based on mutual evaluations of progress, problems, and learners' perceptions of the "match."

overlay and usually behavior problems. Thus, while motivation is a fundamental concern for all students, for those with problems a nuanced classroom focus on motivation is essential.

In transforming classrooms, the following points about motivation warrant particular attention:

Response to intervention must address

(1) *Optimal performance and learning require motivational readiness.* Motivation is a key antecedent condition in any learning situation. Readiness is understood in terms of offering stimulating and supportive environments where learning can be perceived as vivid, valued, and attainable. It is a prerequisite to student attention, involvement, and performance. Poor motivational readiness may be a cause of poor learning and a factor maintaining learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Thus, the need for strategies that can produce a high level of motivational readiness (and reduce avoidance motivation and reactance) so students are mobilized to participate.

- motivational readiness

- motivation as process and outcome concerns

(2) *Motivation represents both a process and an outcome concern.* Individuals may value learning something, but may not be motivated to pursue the processes used. Many students are motivated to learn when they first encounter a topic but do not maintain that motivation. Processes must elicit, enhance, and maintain motivation so that students stay mobilized. Programs must be designed to maintain, enhance, and expand intrinsic motivation so that what is learned is not limited to immediate lessons and is applied in the world beyond the schoolhouse door.

Negative motivation and avoidance reactions and any conditions likely to generate them must be circumvented or at least minimized. Of particular concern are activities students perceive as unchallenging, uninteresting, overdemanding, or overwhelming. Most people react against structures that seriously limit their range of options or that are overcontrolling and coercive. Examples of conditions that can have a negative impact on a person's motivation are sparse resources, excessive rules, and a restrictive day-in, day-out emphasis on drill and remediation.

Students experiencing problems at school usually have extremely negative perceptions of and

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avoidance tendencies toward teachers and activities that look like "the same old thing." Major changes in approach must be made if such students are to change these perceptions. Ultimately, success may depend on the degree to which the students view the adults at school and in the classroom as supportive, rather than indifferent or controlling and the program as personally valuable and obtainable.

(3) *School staff not only need to try to increase motivation – especially intrinsic motivation – but also to avoid practices that decrease it.* Although students may learn a specific lesson at school (e.g., some basic skills), they may have little or no interest in using the new knowledge and skills outside of the classroom. Increasing such interest requires procedures that can reduce negative and increase positive feelings, thoughts, and coping strategies.

Response to intervention must be implemented in ways that increase, and avoid decreasing, intrinsic motivation

With behavior, learning, and emotional problems, it is especially important to identify and minimize experiences that maintain or may increase avoidance motivation. Of particular concern is the need to avoid overreliance on extrinsics to entice and reward since such strategies can decrease intrinsic motivation.

The point is to enhance stable, positive, intrinsic attitudes that mobilize ongoing pursuit of desired ends, throughout the school, and away from school. Developing intrinsic attitudes is basic to increasing the type of motivated practice (reading for pleasure for example) that is essential for mastering and assimilating what has just been learned.
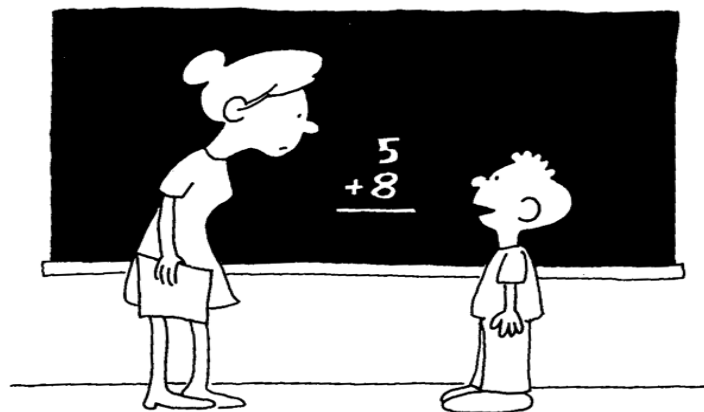
GOSH, MRS. THOMPSON, I WAS READY TO LEARN MATH YESTERDAY. TODAY I'M READY TO LEARN TO READ.

Personalize First; Add Special Assistance if Necessary. A sequential and hierarchical framework can guide efforts to provide a good match and determine the most appropriate and least disruptive intervention needed for individuals with learning and behavior problems (see Exhibit 2). The first step focuses on personalizing instruction in regular classrooms. The intent is to ensure the program is highly responsive to learner differences in both motivation and development and, in the process, to enhance a caring context for learning.

With personalized instruction in place, the next step involves providing special assistance as needed. Note that this second step is introduced only if learners continue to have problems. As outlined in Exhibit 2, step 2 involves three levels of focus.
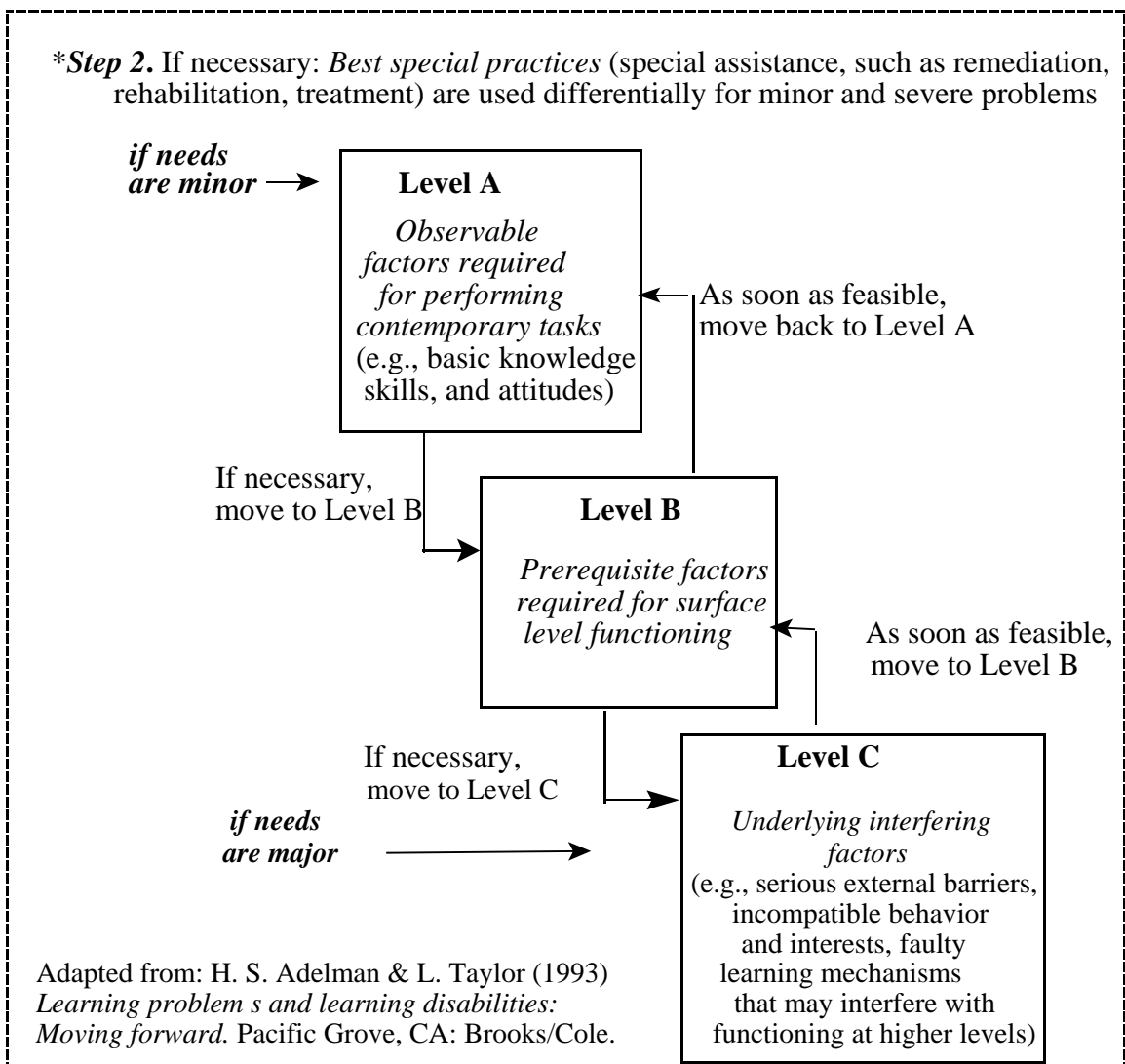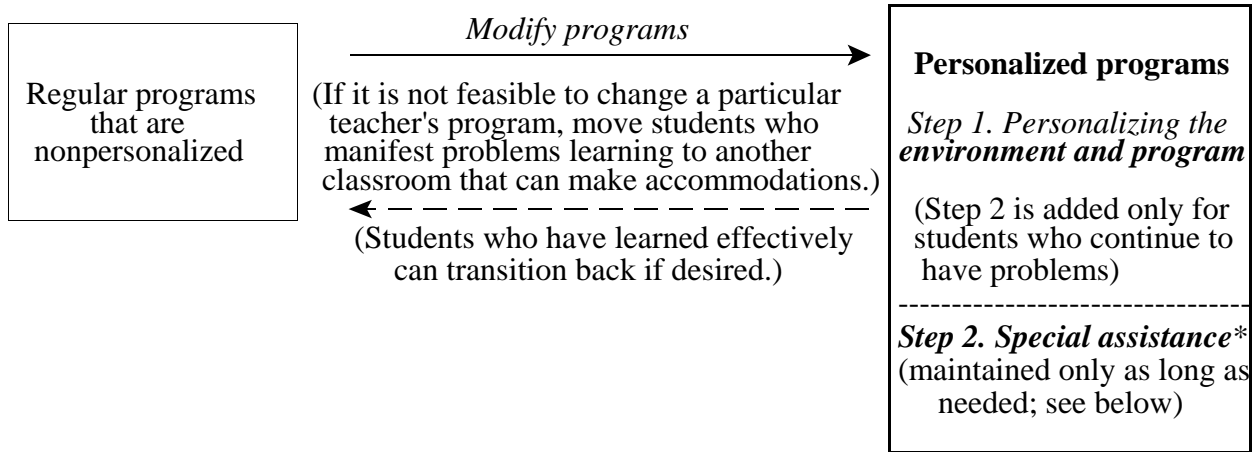
To be a bit more specific:

Step 1 involves *personalizing instruction*. The intent is to ensure a student *perceives* instructional processes, content, and outcomes as a good match with his or her interests and capabilities. The first emphasis is on *motivation*. Thus: Step 1a stresses use of motivation-oriented strategies to (re)engage the student in classroom instruction. This step draws on the broad science-base related to human motivation, with special attention paid to research on intrinsic motivation and psychological reactance. The aim is to enhance student perceptions of significant options and involvement in decision making.

The next concern is *developmental capabilities*. Thus: Step 1b stresses use of teaching strategies that account for current knowledge and skills. In this respect, the emphasis on tutoring (designated as "Supplemental Services" in Title I) can be useful if the student perceives the tutoring as a good fit for learning. Then, if necessary, the focus expands to encompass *special assistance*. Thus: Step 2 stresses use of special assistance strategies to address any major barriers to learning and teaching, with an emphasis on the principle of using the least intervention needed (i.e., doing what is needed, but no more than that). In this respect, the range of strategies referred to as prereferral interventions and the programs and services that constitute student and learning supports are of considerable importance. (Again, the impact depends on the student's perception of how well an intervention fits his or her needs.)

Through this sequential approach, students who have not responded sufficiently to the regular classroom interventions would next receive supportive assistance designed to help them remain in the regular program, and only when all this is found not to be sufficiently effective would there be a referral for special education assessment. (If the problem proves to be severe and disruptive, an alternative setting may be necessary on a temporary basis to provide more intensive and specialized assessments and assistance.)

Exhibit 2

Learning Sequence and Levels

Modify programs

Regular programs that are nonpersonalized

(If it is not feasible to change a particular teacher's program, move students who manifest problems learning to another classroom that can make accommodations.)

(Students who have learned effectively can transition back if desired.)

Personalized programs

Step 1. Personalizing the environment and program

(Step 2 is added only for students who continue to have problems)

Step 2. Special assistance* (maintained only as long as needed; see below)

**Step 2.* If necessary: *Best special practices* (special assistance, such as remediation, rehabilitation, treatment) are used differentially for minor and severe problems

if needs are minor →

Level A

Observable factors required for performing contemporary tasks (e.g., basic knowledge skills, and attitudes)

As soon as feasible, move back to Level A

If necessary, move to Level B

Level B

Prerequisite factors required for surface level functioning

As soon as feasible, move to Level B

If necessary, move to Level C

if needs are major →

Level C

Underlying interfering factors (e.g., serious external barriers, incompatible behavior and interests, faulty learning mechanisms that may interfere with functioning at higher levels)

Adapted from: H. S. Adelman & L. Taylor (1993) *Learning problem s and learning disabilities: Moving forward.* Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Most students do not have learning and behavior problems. And the few children with significant disabilities usually are identified even prior to kindergarten. Others who manifest learning, behavior, and/or emotional problems are identified soon after they begin school. Some students may make a reasonable start, but it is not long before their problems become evident.

For many years, the impetus for identifying problems was so that referrals could be made for special assistance. This led to increasing numbers of referrals, many of which led to assessment for special education. As it became evident that too many students were being inappropriately diagnosed, efforts were made to ensure that intervention steps were taken to resolve the problems within the regular classroom. As noted, this process is commonly called *prereferral intervening* (see Exhibit 3). Response to intervention and a commitment to "Early Intervening" were included in the last reauthorization of the federal *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) to strengthen the process and ensure responding early after the onset of problems occurs systematically.

About Early Intervening Services

IDEA Regulations call for a district to use up to 15 percent of the amount it receives each year under Part B of IDEA to develop and implement coordinated, early intervening services, which may include interagency financing structures, for students in kindergarten through grade 12 (with a particular emphasis on students in kindergarten through grade three) who are not currently identified as needing special education or related services, but who need additional academic and behavioral support to succeed in a general education environment.

Properly conceived and implemented, response to intervention and early intervening are expected to improve the learning opportunities for many students and reduce the number who are *inappropriately* diagnosed with learning disabilities and behavioral disorders, thereby minimizing identification of students who don't need expensive special education. (It is important to emphasize that the tactic involves specific and well-monitored plans for "identified" students and is not to be used as a delaying tactic related to getting students the interventions they need.)

Exhibit 3

Prereferral Intervening

What have been called prereferral interventions identify regular classroom problems, identify the source of the problems (student, teacher, curriculum, environment, etc.), and take steps to resolve the problems within the regular classroom.

School violence, poor academic performance, misbehavior in class -- with increasing numbers of students identified as troubled or in trouble, schools must design systems for intervening prior to referral for special assistance. Otherwise, the system will grind to a halt. A *prereferral intervention* process delineates steps and strategies to guide teachers. The following is one example:

(1) Formulate an initial description of the problem.

(2) Get the youngster's view of what's wrong and, as feasible, explore the problem with the family.

As every teacher knows, the causes of learning, behavior, and emotional problems are hard to analyze. What looks like a learning disability or an attentional problem may be emotionally-based. Misbehavior often arises in reaction to learning difficulties. What appears as a school problem may be the result of problems at home. The following are some things to consider in seeking more information about what may be causing a youngster's problem.

(a) Through enhanced personal contacts, build a positive working relationship with the youngster and family.

(b) Focus first on assets (e.g. positive attributes, outside interests, hobbies, what the youngster likes at school and in class).

(c) Ask about what the youngster doesn't like at school.

(d) Explore the reasons for "dislikes" (e.g., Are assignments seen as too hard? as uninteresting? Is the youngster embarrassed because others will think s/he does not have the ability to do assignments? Is the youngster picked on? rejected? alienated?)

(e) Explore other possible causal factors.

(f) Explore what the youngster and those in the home think can be done to make things better (including extra support from a volunteer, a peer, friend, etc.).

(g) Discuss some new things the youngster and those in the home would be *willing* to try to make the situation better.

Prereferral Intervening (cont.)

(3) Try new strategies in the classroom -- based on the best information about what is causing the problem.

Some Things to Try

•   Make changes to (a) improve the match between a youngster's program and his/her interests and capabilities and (b) try to find ways for her/him to have a special, positive status in class, at the school, and in the community. Talk and work with other staff in developing ideas along these lines.

•   Add resources for extra support (aide, volunteers, peer tutors) to help the youngster's efforts to learn and perform. Create time to interact and relate with the youngster as an individual.

•   Discuss with the youngster (and those in the home) why the problems are occurring.

•   Specifically focus on exploring matters with the youngster that will suggest ways to enhance positive motivation.

•   Change aspects of the program (e.g.,materials, environment) to provide a better match with his/her interests and skills.

•   Provide enrichment options (in and out of class).

•   Use resources such as volunteers, aides, and peers to enhance the youngster's social support network.

•   Specifically focus on exploring ways those in the home can enhance their problem-solving efforts.

•   If necessary include other staff (e.g., counselor, principal) in a special discussion with the youngster exploring reasons for the problem and ways to enhance positive involvement at school and in class.

(4) If the new strategies don't work, *talk to others* at school to learn about approaches they find helpful (e.g., reach out for support/mentoring/coaching, participate with others in clusters and teams, observe how others teach in ways that effectively address differences in motivation and capability, request additional staff development on working with such youngsters).

(5) If necessary, use the *school's referral processes* to ask for additional support services.

(6) Work with referral resources to *coordinate your efforts* **with theirs** for classroom success.

As noted, response to intervention overlaps ideas about prereferral interventions but is intended to be more systematically implemented with special attention to enhancing teacher capability to carry out "well-designed and well-implemented early intervention" in the regular classroom to address a student's problems. In the context of a classroom, this means pursuing response to intervention in a sequential and hierarchical manner (again see Exhibit 2).

A sequential and hierarchical approach provides a way to enhance the assessment of whether more intensive and perhaps specialized assistance (and perhaps diagnosis) is required. Such an approach also addresses the core difficulty of mobilizing unmotivated students (and particularly those who have become actively disengaged from classroom instruction). If motivational considerations are not effectively addressed, there is no way to validly assess whether a student has a true disability or disorder.

More generally, by themselves, response to intervention strategies do not address major barriers to student learning. Instruction must be supported by a broad-range of student and learning supports focusing on matters such as supporting transitions, responding to and preventing crisis events, and enhancing home and community engagement.

Embedding Response to Intervention into a
Comprehensive System of Student and Learning Supports

If the Response to Intervention initiative is pursued simplistically as a matter of providing more and better instruction, it is unlikely to be effective for a great many students. However, if the strategies are understood as one part of a comprehensive system of classroom and school-wide learning supports, schools not only can address problems effectively early after onset, but can prevent many from occurring. Referral for special education assessment comes only after a broad-range of student and learning supports prove inadequate in enabling learning.

Thus, the context for response to intervention and early intervening is a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive system to reduce learning, behavior, and emotional problems, promote social/emotional development, and effectively re-engage students in classroom learning. Such a system should not only reduce the number of students inappropriately referred for special education or specialized services, but also should enhance attendance, reduce misbehavior, close the achievement gap, and increase graduation rates (Adelman & Taylor, 2006a, b).

A comprehensive system of student and learning supports involves more than a multi-level or multi-tiered continuum of interventions

Current conceptualizations of response to intervention embrace a continuum of interventions and refer to the continuum as a multi-level or multi-tiered model (Harlacher & Siler, 2011; National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010). Few will argue against the notion that conceptualizing levels of intervention is a good starting point for framing the nature and scope of interventions needed to ensure all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. However, as our center has stressed over the years, the levels of the continuum need to be conceptualized in terms of what they aim to do and as interrelated and overlapping intervention subsystems focused on (1) promoting development and preventing problems, (2) responding to problems as early-after-onset as feasible, and (3) treating severe, pervasive, and chronic problems. Moreover, each subsystem is seen as needing to link school and community interventions in ways that integrate, coordinate, and weave resources together.

A comprehensive system of student and learning supports, however, involves more than a continuum of interventions. There is the pressing matter of coalescing the laundry list of fragmented programs and services designed to promote healthy development and address barriers to learning and teaching. This requires a formulation to guide organizing programs and services into a circumscribed set of arenas reflecting the content purpose of the activity. Our work emphasizes six arenas encompassing interventions to:

- Enhance regular classroom strategies to enable learning (e.g., improving instruction for students who with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems and those have become disengaged from learning at school; includes a focus on prevention, early intervening, and use of strategies such as response to intervention)

- Support transitions (i.e., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes and many other transitions)

- Increase home and school connections and engagement

- Respond to, and where feasible, prevent crises

- Increase community involvement and support (outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)

- Facilitate student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.

Some version of the six basic arenas has held-up over the last decade in a variety of venues across the country. The continuum and six content arenas can be formed into an intervention framework for a comprehensive system of learning supports. Such a framework can guide and unify school improvement planning for developing the system. The matrix provides a unifying framework for mapping what is in place and analyzing gaps. Overtime, this type of mapping and analyses are needed at the school level, for a family of schools (e.g., a feeder pattern of schools), at the district level, community-wide, and at regional, state, and national levels. We have presented all this in detail elsewhere and need not do so here (e.g., see Adelman & Taylor, 2006a,b, 2010; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2011a,b).

Implementing response to intervention in context requires fundamental systemic changes & capacity building that reflects those changes

Given the importance of implementing response to intervention in context, doing so clearly will require fundamental systemic change and considerable capacity building (Adelman & Taylor, 2007; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008). This includes reworking policy (including accountability) and operational infrastructure, ensuring strong leadership and commitment, and revising leader and staff job descriptions in keeping with the need to develop a comprehensive system of student and learning supports. And a multi-year plan for personnel development must be designed to ensure teachers and student support staff are prepared to play key roles in transforming classroom and schoolwide practices. Given sparse resources, accomplishing all this calls for braiding together the school and community resources.

Of particular concern with respect to response to intervention is increasing teacher and support staff capacity for implementing the Step 1 and 2 interventions described above and illustrated in Exhibit 2. Staff must learn how to approach *special assistance* in a sequential and hierarchical manner. First, they must be able to use reteaching strategies to better accommodate individual needs and differences. They also must be prepared to teach prerequisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes the student may not have learned along the way. Finally, they must be able to play a role in addressing major barriers that are interfering with student learning and performance. And, to ensure response to intervention strategies can be implemented in a personalized way, schools must promote the type of collaborative classrooms and grouping strategies that have the effect of turning big classes into smaller units (see Addenda A and C).

Concluding Comments

The complex set of factors causing poor student performance call for a comprehensive and systemic set of interventions. This is particularly essential in school settings where a large proportion of the student body are not performing well. In such schools, the effectiveness of response to intervention strategies will be dependent on how well the school addresses barriers to learning and teaching.

As another stand-alone intervention, response to intervention risks becoming just one more fragmented and marginalized approach to addressing learning and teaching problems. At the same time, the interest and resources being devoted to the initiative present an opportunity to catalyze and leverage the type of systemic change that can help transform how schools go about ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school.

School improvement planners can use the opportunity to embed all stand-alone initiatives, such as response to intervention, positive behavioral interventions, dropout prevention programs, and so forth, into a design for developing a comprehensive system of student and learning supports. Development of such a system and fully integrating it into school improvement policy and practice enhances a school's focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students. Such a system is key to promoting the well-being and intrinsic motivation for school success of all students, their families, and the school staff and is a key element in facilitating emergence of a positive school climate.

It is the response to such a comprehensive set of interventions that will provide the type of data necessary for sound decision making about how best to enable learning and reduce misdiagnoses of LD and ADHD.

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Addendum A

Volunteers as an Invaluable Resource*

Volunteers can be a multifaceted resource in a classroom and throughout a school. For this to be the case, however, the school staff must value volunteers and learn how to recruit, train, nurture, and use them effectively. When implemented properly, school volunteer programs can enable teachers to personalize instruction, free teachers and other school personnel to meet students' needs more effectively, broaden students' experiences, strengthen school-community understanding and relations, enhance home involvement, and enrich the lives of volunteers. In the classroom, volunteers can provide just the type of extra support needed to enable staff to conference and work with students who require special assistance.

Volunteers may help students on a one-to-one basis or in small groups. Group interactions are especially important in enhancing a student's cooperative interactions with peers. One-to-one work is often needed to develop a positive relationship with a particularly aggressive or withdrawn student, in re-engaging a student who has disengaged from classroom learning, and in fostering successful task completion with a student easily distracted by peers. Volunteers can help enhance a student's motivation and skills and, at the very least, can help counter negative effects that arise when a student has difficulty adjusting to school. Working under the direction of the teacher and student support staff, they can be especially helpful in establishing a supportive relationship with students who are having trouble adjusting to school.

The Many Roles for Volunteers in the Classroom and Throughout the School

I. Welcoming and Social Support
   A. In the Front Office
       1. Greeting and welcoming
       2. Providing information to those who come to the front desk
       3. Escorting guests, new students/families to destinations on the campus
       4. Orienting newcomers
   B. Staffing a Welcoming Club
       1. Connecting newly arrived parents with peer buddies
       2. Helping develop orientation and other information resources for newcomers
       3. Helping establish newcomer support groups

II. Working with Designated Students in the Classroom
   A. Helping to orient new students
   B. Engaging disinterested, distracted, and distracting students
   C. Providing personal guidance and support for specific students in class to help them
       stay focused and engaged

III. Providing Additional Opportunities and Support in Class and on the Campus
       A. Recreation
       B. Enrichment
       C. Tutoring
       D. Mentoring

IV. Helping Enhance Positive Climate Throughout the School – including assisting with "chores"
       A. Assisting with Supervision in Class and Throughout the Campus
       B. Contributing to Campus "Beautification"
       C. Helping to Get Materials Ready

Volunteers can be recruited from a variety of sources: parents and other family members; others in the community such as senior citizens and workers in local businesses; college students; and peers and older students at the school. There also are organized programs that can provide volunteers, such as local service clubs. And, increasingly, institutions of higher education are requiring students to participate in learning through service. Schools committed to enhancing home and community involvement in schooling can pursue volunteer programs as a productive element in their efforts to do so.

Few teachers have the time to recruit and train a cadre of volunteers. Teachers can work with student support staff and the school administration to set up a volunteer program for the school. Initially, a small group of volunteers can be recruited and taught how to implement and maintain the volunteer program (e.g., how to recruit a large pool of volunteers, help train them, nurture them, work with them to recruit replacements).

> *The cost of volunteer programs is relatively small compared to the impact they can have on school climate and the quality of life for students and school staff.*

*For more on this topic, see our center's online clearinghouse Quick Find on *Volunteers in Schools* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/volunteers.html

About School and Classroom Climate

The concept of *climate* plays a major role in shaping the quality of school life, teaching, learning, and support. School and classroom climate are temporal, and somewhat fluid, perceived qualities of the immediate setting which emerge from the complex transaction of many factors. In turn, the climate reflects the influence of the underlying, institutionalized values and belief systems, norms, ideologies, rituals, and traditions that constitute the school *culture*. And, of course, the climate and culture at a school also are shaped by the surrounding political, social, cultural, and economic contexts (e.g., home, neighborhood, city, state, country).

School and classroom climate sometimes are referred to as the learning environment, as well as by terms such as atmosphere, ambience, ecology, and milieu. Depending on quality, the impact on students and staff can be beneficial for or a barrier to learning.

Key concepts for understanding school and classroom climate are social system organization; social attitudes; staff and student morale; power, control, guidance, support, and evaluation structures; curricular and instructional practices; communicated expectations; efficacy; accountability demands; cohesion; competition; "fit" between learner and classroom; system maintenance, growth, and change; orderliness; and safety. Moos (e.g., 1979) groups such concepts into three dimensions: (1) Relationship (i.e., the nature and intensity of personal relationships within the environment; the extent to which people are involved in the environment and support and help each other); (2) Personal development (i.e., basic directions along which personal growth and self-enhancement tend to occur); and (3) System maintenance and change (i.e., the extent to which the environment is orderly, clear in expectations, maintains control, and is responsive to change).

Research has indicated a range of strategies for enhancing a positive climate. All school staff have a significant role to play in ensuring that such strategies are well-implemented and maintained.

Our center at UCLA has emphasized that school climate is a perceived quality of the setting (Adelman & Taylor, 2005). It emerges in a somewhat fluid state from the complex transaction of many immediate environmental factors (e.g., physical, material, organizational, operational, and social variables). Both the climate of the classroom and the school reflect the influence of a school's culture, which is a stable quality emerging from underlying, institutionalized values and belief systems, norms, ideologies, rituals, and traditions. And, of course, classroom climate and culture both are shaped by the school's surrounding and embedded political, social, cultural, and economic contexts (e.g., home, neighborhood, city, state, country).

Importance of Classroom Climate

Classroom climate is seen as a major determiner of classroom behavior and learning. Understanding the nature of classroom climate is a basic element in improving schools.

The concept of classroom climate implies the intent to establish and maintain a positive context that facilitates classroom learning, but in practice, classroom climates range from hostile or toxic to welcoming and supportive and can fluctuate daily and over the school year. Moreover, because the concept is a psychological construct, different observers may have different perceptions of the climate in a given classroom. Therefore, for purposes of his early research, Moos (1979) measured classroom environment in terms of the shared perceptions of those in the classroom. Prevailing approaches to measuring classroom climate use (1) teacher and student perceptions, (2) external observer's ratings and systematic coding, and/or (3) naturalistic inquiry, ethnography, case study, and interpretative

assessment techniques (Fraser, 1998; Freiberg, 1999). Because the concept is a psychological construct, climate in a given school and classroom can be perceived differently by observers. With this in mind, Moos (1979) measured classroom environment in terms of the shared perceptions of those in the classroom. The National School Climate Council (2007) recommends that school climate assessments focus on four dimensions: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and the institutional environment – using surveys that encompass the perceptions of students, parents and guardians, and school personnel.*

Analyses of research suggest significant relationships between classroom climate and matters such as student engagement, behavior, self-efficacy, achievement, and social and emotional development, principal leadership style, stages of educational reform, teacher burnout, and overall quality of school life. For example, studies report strong associations between achievement levels and classrooms that are perceived as having greater cohesion and goal-direction and less disorganization and conflict. Research also suggests that the impact of classroom climate may be greater on students from low-income homes and groups that often are discriminated against.

Given the correlational nature of classroom climate research, cause and effect interpretations remain speculative. The broader body of organizational research does indicate the profound role accountability pressures play in shaping organizational climate (Cohen, 2006; Cohen, et al., 2009, 2010;Mahoney & Hextall, 2000). Thus, it seems likely that the increasing demands for higher achievement test scores and control of student behavior contribute to a classroom climate that is reactive, over-controlling, and over-reliant on external reinforcement to motivate positive functioning.

A Caring Context for Learning

From a psychological perspective, learning and teaching are experienced most positively when the learner cares about learning and the teacher cares about teaching. *Moreover, the whole process benefits greatly when all the participants care about each other.* Thus, good schools and good teachers work diligently to create an atmosphere that encourages mutual support, caring, and a sense of community. Such an atmosphere can play a key role in preventing learning, behavior, emotional, and health problems and promoting social and emotional learning and well-being.

Caring has moral, social, and personal facets. And when all facets of caring are present and balanced, they can nurture individuals and facilitate the process of learning. At the same time, caring in all its dimensions should be a major focus of what is taught and learned. This means a focus throughout on fostering positive socio-emotional and physical development.

Caring begins when students (and their families) first arrive at a school. Classrooms and schools can do their job better if students feel they are truly welcome and have a range of social supports. A key facet of welcoming encompasses effectively connecting new students with peers and adults who can provide social support and advocacy.

On an ongoing basis, caring and a positive classroom and schoolwide climate is best maintained through use of personalized instruction, regular student conferences, activity fostering social and emotional development, and opportunities for students to attain positive status. Efforts to create a caring classroom and schoolwide climate benefit from programs for cooperative learning, peer tutoring, mentoring, advocacy, peer counseling and mediation, human relations, and conflict resolution. Special attention is needed to promote practices that enhance motivation to learn and perform, while avoiding practices that decrease motivation and/or produce avoidance motivation and that focuses on mobilizing unmotivated students (and particularly those who have become actively disengaged from classroom instruction). Clearly, a myriad of strategies can contribute to students feeling positively connected to the classroom and school.

*Note: The National School Climate Council (2007) offers the following definitions:

"School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. School climate is based on patterns of people's experience of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching, learning, leadership practices, and organizational structures."

"A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development and learning necessary for a productive, contributing and satisfying life in a democratic society. This climate includes norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally, intellectually and physically safe. People are engaged and respected. Students, families and educators work together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision. Educators model and nurture an attitude that emphasizes the benefits and satisfaction from learning. Each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment."

Resources

Increasing interest in enhancing school climate is reflected in the establishment of the National School Climate Center and the U.S. Department of Education's initiative for Safe and Supportive Schools. See
  • the brief School Climate Research Summary posted on the National School Climate Center site – http://nscc.csee.net/effective/school_climate_research_summary.pdf
  • the National School Climate Standards – http://www.schoolclimate.org/climate/standards.php
  • the U.S. Dept. of Education's Safe and Supportive Schools (S3) grant program which aims to provide the resources for systems to measure school climate and safety at the building level and to help intervene in those schools with the greatest needs – http://www2.ed.gov/programs/safesupportiveschools/index.html

For more resources, see our center's online clearinghouse Quick Find on *School Climate* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/environments.htm

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Addendum C
Turning Big Classes into Smaller Units

Just as it is evident that we need to turn schools with large enrollments into sets of small schools, we must do the same in the classroom everyday. As a report in 2000 from the American Youth Policy Forum states:

> "The structure and organization of a High School of the Millennium is very different than that of the conventional high school. First and foremost, [the school] is designed to provide small, personalized, and caring learning communities for students . . . . The smaller groups allow a number of adults . . . to work together with the students . . . as a way to develop more meaningful relationships and as a way for the teachers to better understand the learning needs of each student."

The Key is Grouping

Aside from times when a learning objective is best accomplished with the whole class, the general trend should be to create small classes out of the whole. This involves grouping students in various ways, as well as providing opportunities for individual activity. At a fundamental level, grouping is an essential strategy in turning classrooms with large enrollments into a set of simultaneously operating small classes.

Clearly, students should never be grouped in ways that harm them (e.g., putting them in low ability tracks, segregating those with problems). But grouping is essential for effective teaching. *Appropriate grouping* facilitates student engagement, learning, and performance. Besides enhancing academic learning, it can increase intrinsic motivation by promoting feelings of personal and interpersonal competence, self-determination, and positive connection with others. Moreover, it can foster autonomous learning skills, personal responsibility for learning, and healthy social-emotional attitudes and skills.

A well-designed classroom enables teachers to spend most of their time rotating among small self-monitored groups (e.g., two to six members) and individual learners. With team teaching and staff collaboration, such grouping can be done across classrooms.

Effective grouping is facilitated by ensuring teachers have adequate resources (including space, materials, and help). The key to effective grouping, however, is to take the time needed for youngsters to learn to work well with each other, with other resource personnel, and at times independently. Students are grouped and regrouped flexibly and regularly based on individual interests, needs, and for the benefits to be derived from diversity. Small learning groups are established for cooperative inquiry and learning, concept and skill development, problem solving, motivated practice, peer- and cross-age tutoring, and other forms of activity that can be facilitated by peers, aides, and/or volunteers. In a small group, students have more opportunities to participate. In heterogeneous, cooperative learning groups, each student has an interdependent role in pursuing a common learning goal and can contribute on a par with their capabilities.

Three types of groupings that are common are:

- *Needs-Based Grouping:* Short-term groupings are established for students with similar learning needs (e.g., to teach or reteach them particular skills and to do so in keeping with their current interests and capabilities).

- *Interest-Based Grouping*: Students who already are motivated to pursue an activity usually can be taught to work together well on active learning tasks.

- *Designed-Diversity Grouping*: For some objectives, it is desirable to combine sets of students who come from different backgrounds and have different abilities and interests (e.g., to discuss certain topics, foster certain social capabilities, engender mutual support for learning).

All three types provide opportunities to enhance interpersonal functioning and an understanding of working relationships and of factors effecting group functioning. And, in all forms of grouping, approaches such as cooperative learning and computer-assisted instruction are relevant.

Recognize and Accommodate Diversity

Every classroom is diverse to some degree. Diversity arises from many factors: gender, ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, religion, capability, disability, interests, and so forth. In grouping students, it is important to draw on the strengths of diversity. For example, a multi-ethnic classroom enables teachers to group students across ethnic lines to bring different perspectives to the learning activity. This allows students not only to learn about other perspectives, it can enhance critical thinking and other higher order conceptual abilities. It also can foster the type of intergroup understanding and relationships essential to establishing a school climate of caring and mutual respect. And, of course, the entire curriculum and all instructional activities must incorporate an appreciation of diversity, and teachers must plan ways to appropriately accommodate individual and group differences.

Collaborative or Team Teaching

As Hargreaves (1994) notes:

> "The way to relieve the uncertainty and open-endedness that characterizes classroom teaching is to create communities of colleagues who work collaboratively [in cultures of shared learning and positive risk-taking] to set their own professional limits and standards, while still remaining committed to continuous improvement. Such communities can also bring together the professional and personal lives of teachers in a way that supports growth and allows problems to be discussed without fear of disapproval or punishment."

Obviously, it helps to have multiple collaborators in the classroom. An aide and/or volunteers, for example, can assist with establishing and maintaining well-functioning groups, as well as providing special support and guidance for designated individuals. As teachers increasingly open their doors to others, assistance can be solicited from paid tutors, resource and special education teachers, pupil services personnel, and an ever widening range of volunteers (e.g., tutors, peer buddies, parents, mentors, and any others who can bring special abilities into the classroom and offer additional options for learning). And, of course, team teaching offers a potent way to expand the range of options for personalizing instruction. Not only can teaming benefit students, it can be a great boon to teachers. A good collaboration is one where colleagues mesh professionally and personally. It doesn't mean that there is agreement about everything, but there must be agreement about what constitutes good classroom practices.

Collaborations can take various forms. For example, teaming may take the form of:

- *Parallel Work* – team members combine their classes or other work and teach to their strengths. This may involve specific facets of the curriculum (e.g., one person covers math, another reading; they both cover different aspects of science) or different students

(e.g., for specific activities, they divide the students and work with those to whom each relates to best or can support in the best way).

- *Complementary Work* – one team member takes the lead and another facilitates follow-up activity.
- *Special Assistance* – while one team member provides basic instruction, another focuses on those students who need special assistance.

Usually, the tendency is to think in terms of two or more teachers teaming to share the instructional load. We stress, however, the value of expanding the team to include support staff, aides, volunteers, and designated students to help in creating small groupings. Teachers and support staff can work together to recruit and train others to join in the collaborative effort. And, with access to the Internet and distance learning, the nature and scope of collaboration has the potential to expand in dramatic fashion.

A Note About Students as Collaborative Helpers

Besides the mutual benefits students get from cooperative learning groups and other informal ways they help each other, formal peer programs can be invaluable assets. Students can be taught to be peer tutors, group discussion leaders, role models, and mentors. Other useful roles include: peer buddies (to welcome, orient, and provide social support as a new student transitions into the class and school), peer conflict mediators, and much more. Student helpers benefit their peers, themselves, and the school staff, and enhance the school's efforts to create a caring climate and a sense of community.

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