



IRREFUTABLE INFLUENCE

THE IMPACT OF SCHOOL CULTURE ON STUDENT INTERVENTION SUCCESS

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About the Author

Dr. Rosemary Tralli

Rosemary Tralli is a certified special education teacher and administrator. She received a bachelor's degree in special education from Southern Connecticut State University, a master's degree in counseling at Central Connecticut State University, a certificate of graduate studies in educational leadership from the University of Connecticut, and her doctorate in educational leadership from Andrews University.

Rosemary is dedicated to the provision of instructional services that are inclusive and respectful of all students. She spent the first 10 years of her career teaching adolescents with learning and emotional challenges at a local high school. It was there that she began to understand the power and implications of school culture on student success. Under the mainstreaming philosophy that was prevalent at the time, caring general educators struggled to address the unique gifts and characteristics of students with special needs. Students were expected to conform to the instructional conditions of each classroom regardless of their learning preferences, challenges and needs. It was also a time when Rosemary learned to value the significant role of school/family partnerships on school culture, learning success and student dignity.

Rosemary gained resources to support student advocacy and equitable inclusive practices as the Strategic Instruction Model (SIM) from the University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning (CRL) was introduced in her home state of Connecticut. She has applied SIM learning strategies, content enhancement routines, and professional development tools for over 30 years as a national SIM Professional Development Leader and educator. SIM researchers Dr. Donald Deshler and Dr. Jean Schumaker were instrumental mentors as Rosemary honed methods to ensure successful transitions of adolescents into post-secondary experiences.

Rosemary's administrative experiences have centered on servant leadership measures to support the development of the whole child. She has led district and state initiatives in curriculum development, intervention systems, strategic planning, and professional development. She has worked with state departments to develop training and support programs for new teachers.

Rosemary is well-versed in current practices, challenges and expectations in the field of education. Her experiences as a public school educator, consultant, and university liaison led to her inevitable interest in the impact of school culture on school health and learning outcomes. This book illustrates her pragmatic lens to the realities, significance, and measures to strengthen the cultural conditions in every school.

Preface

It is incredibly painful to watch your child find ways to reject school...while he is still in kindergarten. The hopes you have for his future, and your appreciation of his gifts and promise are incrementally shattered by the white-knuckled rollercoaster ride of formal education. You watch this child grow as a strategic learner each year, but not in ways you had hoped. He masters strategies of work avoidance, feigns illness, and diverts attention through off-task behaviors. He is labeled as a “struggling learner” and eventually as a “special education student.” In the earliest years of elementary school, he plummets and self-identifies as the dumb kid in the class. It is hard to halt this descent that strips away his self-esteem, his resilience, and any hopes that his promise could be actualized.

By the time he reaches high school, this young adult is riddled with self-doubt, low motivation, and weak academic performance. Year after year, and with decreasing mental fortitude, well-intentioned teachers try to adjust his learning opportunities and instructional conditions. Nonetheless, he leaves high school with barely enough credits to graduate and with little preparation for adult life.

I have connected with children like this, their parents and their teachers every year during my four decades as an educator and parent. I have witnessed the genuine care, deep concerns, frustration and grief of those who worked hard to support them. It is difficult to fathom the extent of this dilemma after years of research, resource development, professional training, and legislative accountabilities that are meant to confront this matter.

The focus of this book, however, is not to lament the issues. Its purpose is to address this challenge proactively and celebrate the powerful influence of culture on our growth in supporting students through intervention services. This is a resource built from my firm conviction that our educational system can improve. As a teacher, administrator, professional developer and educational consultant, I have developed a deep appreciation for the compassionate and steadfast stakeholders who support struggling learners. This book is dedicated to school reform leaders (school administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community stakeholders) who strive to provide respectful experiences and successful outcomes for all students. This resource offers observations, perspectives,

tools, and reflections for use at school and district levels that are realistic and practical within the context of authentic school settings. It is a candid account of school realities I have witnessed across the country. It is a call for courageous conversations around our practices. We all want what is best for our students. We need tools to analyze our conditions that will result in agreed-upon adaptations to best serve all children.

The overarching premises behind the information I offer include the following:

1. Intervention systems (i.e., not just discrete interventions) are critical to support all learners. They are not negotiable.
2. The underlying cultural conditions of a school will influence the intervention process.
3. Core values, reflective practice and accountability, voice and leadership, and relationships are foundational factors that grow sustainable cultures.

Few educators would argue the value of implementing interventions to support the growth of every student in our schools. We all strive to ensure that each child's promise is fulfilled through equitable access to high-quality education. Over the past decades, we gathered and applied much information about intervention. Traditionally, there has been no shortage of guidance on how to choose the right assessments, how to provide tiered interventions, and monitor progress. There are online programs to support data management, research on academic and behavioral interventions, and countless resources that describe quality interventions under traditional conditions. It is vitally important to select, adapt and utilize the best evidence-based resources and practices.

But how do we choose the right approach? Despite the vast pool of available resources, the needs of many students are not yet met. Technical expertise and constructs are not enough. The process requires extraordinary teamwork, trust, risk-taking for trialability, and careful data analysis. The strength and nature of the school's culture will influence this process. Therefore, it is critical that we examine the impact of underlying cultural beliefs on our practice. Such courageous analyses will free us to make innovative, flexible, and sage decisions that support all students.

Can a school, given the complexities of a “new normal” environment, develop adequate and equitable educational conditions that include appropriate support for challenged learners? The answer is simply, “Yes!”

Last year I had an epiphany – what Heath and Heath (2017) call a “defining moment.” After years of observing and participating in intervention meetings, I started to predict events that were to unfold. I realized that I could sit in a meeting and paraphrase what an interventionist was about to share regarding a student's needs. I could describe the types of discrete interventions that were to be recommended. At first, I entertained the notion that I was a bit clairvoyant. In reality I came to understand that I had learned to distinguish highly consistent patterns of behavior specific to a

given school. These patterns all had to do with the school's culture. This insight was the catalyst for sharing my experiences with other instructional leaders through this book.

Intervention systems are enacted in various forms under different labels and define the parameters by which services are delivered. Some processes provide tiered levels that progress to special education services while others promote the concept as a general education initiative. Response to Intervention (RTI) is a common title describing intervention processes in many states. Intervention is branded in my home state of Connecticut as Scientific Research Based Interventions (SRBI) while it is identified as Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) in other states.

The University of Kansas Center for Research on Learning has developed the Content Literacy Continuum. Certain models incorporate both academic and behavioral systems while others focus on academics. Some models have three tiers while others integrate more support levels. Regardless, the infrastructure should guarantee purposeful instructional adaptations to meet student needs. This book uses the term RTI to address the intervention process, but the concepts are meant to be applied across programs and labels. It is important to note that my use of the term "intervention" is primarily related to the infrastructure or system that allows for the assignment of purposeful conditions to meet student needs. Chapter Four speaks to the role of individual interventions within that broader context.

The RTI Action Network supports the adoption of a selected RTI model by all schools to ensure student success (Prasse, 2021). In agreement with that stance, it is my firm belief that RTI has the potential to better the lives of students across the country. However, it could easily face the same demise as many other school improvement efforts. Hettelman (2019) identifies fundamental issues of money and management along with documentation of scale, models and data. He also points to issues with the quality and types of intervention practices. Nonetheless, he asserts that RTI failure is not an acceptable option. We can develop an infrastructure that ensures high-quality education for all children.

Despite great variability in practices across states and schools, RTI reflects our commitment to respect and honor the potential of every child. The process, however, is highly complex and challenging to navigate. At the practitioner's level, it is difficult to mitigate the many technical factors that need to be addressed. Great local leadership is critical to develop insightful practices, resources, and accountability systems. The key to deep coordination and ultimate success lies within the system cornerstone: school culture.

Evidence-based practices are critical to school success, and I appreciate the need to integrate high-quality instructional processes within any intervention system. I have the greatest respect for researchers, external professional developers, and consultants. I have contributed to the field in each of these roles. This book, however, respectfully tempers recommendations from stakeholder groups who live outside the fabric of

daily school life. For decades, I have examined how schools attempt to integrate high-leverage practices. This resource recognizes the pragmatic reality of schools while attempting to meet necessary school reform efforts. My roles as a parent, local teacher, and administrator are at the heart of my message.

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Introduction:

The Dynamics of Cultural Influence on Student Intervention Systems



*Far and away the best prize that life has to offer is the chance to work
hard at work worth doing.*

— Theodore Roosevelt

Our Current Challenges

We hear it from people in all sectors of life – the three things you can count on are death, taxes, and change. Then, there is the touted non-example of change: school reform. True and sustainable change in schools is considered, by many, impossible to attain. One of my doctoral professors challenged me to find a school system that sustained a new initiative over 10 years. He insisted there were none. New ideas come and go depending on the leadership of the time, new curricula, research trends, and state and federal mandates. “This too will pass” is a decades-old mantra heard by school personnel across the nation. But there is good news. Efficacious schools do not accept this message. The stakes for our students are high, and we have an obligation to ensure rigorous and equitable educations to all children in our care.

More than ever, we need to address implementation of quality intervention systems. We face the reality of a “new normal” in educational practices during this unprecedented era of teaching and learning. As a result of inconsistent educational opportunities during the recent pandemic, it is likely that the majority of students require supplemental support.

Chapter 1

School Culture



Culture is like the wind. It is invisible; yet its effect can be seen and felt.

– Bryan Walker

The influence of school culture on RTI is at the heart of every message in this book. Therefore, it is important to start by developing a shared language around the definition and implications of school culture within this context. Culture is a broad term and concept that encompasses a multitude of factors with vast philosophical, societal and political implications. The definition of school culture in this book is narrowed to address those conditions in educational organizations that impact RTI quality.

Climate or Culture?

Many school reform resources describe the complementary relationship between culture and climate. Attribute comparisons are often illustrated through lists of characteristics, examples and non-examples. There is contradiction in the literature about what constitutes school climate versus culture. This section speaks to two related misconceptions that can mask RTI issues in any school:

- Misconception 1: A Strong School Climate Assumes a Strong School Culture
- Misconception 2: School Climate Is the Measurement of School Culture

Chapter 2

Stakeholders and Their Motivations



The parents of leadership are influence and trust.

– Richie Norton

Educators play powerful and interdependent roles that influence the social underpinnings of RTI. They form communities of practice around topics of common interest (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and share methods to address those areas. These communities of practice influence school culture as they shape the direction and outcomes of instructional systems. Likewise, other school stakeholders, including parents, students and community members are motivated to influence the operations of their schools. A careful analysis of the roles and motivations of all players within the community are essential.

Even in challenging times, RTI can be achieved through a deep and sustained commitment from the school community members. RTI processes in schools that establish communities of practice are successful in maximizing opportunities for all students. Let's revisit Addison Middle School to exemplify this point.

Addison Middle School was a model “community of practice.” Its strategic plan defined the intended conditions of a strong intervention process. Aligned values, vision and mission statements were developed previously through staff, parent and community collaborations. Everyone owned the charge. The teachers’ contract included language about intervention expectations, and that language was supported by union leadership. Administrators crafted thoughtful interview questions and hired only those professionals and staff who shared the espoused values of the

Chapter 3

Professional Development

Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.

– Aristotle

Start with WHY

Simon Sinek has a wonderful TED Talk, “How Great Leaders Inspire Action.” I believe that Sinek’s message is a necessary component of all RTI professional development planning. Sinek explains the biology behind choices that adults make, and he stresses the importance of WHY. He indicates that adults make choices based on their values. The part of the brain that controls decision-making is the limbic brain, and that area cares only about WHY. Most organizations mistakenly approach leadership and salesmanship with WHAT and HOW (addressing the neocortex brain). However, Sinek states, “People don’t buy WHAT you do... but WHY you do it.” He provides success stories about Apple and other companies based on this brain research.

As educational leaders, we need to reflect on this concept as we assess the quality of our RTI professional development experiences. We often appeal to the intellectual side of learning as we assume that a logical professional would value all that RTI research has to offer. However, educators engage in professional learning from baselines of self-efficacy, values and beliefs. We come to our positions with different preservice and professional learning experiences that influence our beliefs about service provision to our students. HOW and WHAT are important factors, but educators must accept the rationale for RTI services before integrating any processes.

Chapter 4

Interventions



Together may we give our children roots to grow and wings to fly.

– Anonymous

A Shared Definition

Let's start with non-examples of RTI interventions. Places, service providers and commercial programs are not interventions. Each may offer support, but an intervention plan needs to provide more than an environmental accommodation or discrete skill development program. RTI plans should ensure measurable student growth in a targeted area. A discrete intervention within that plan should tie student outcomes back to curricular access. An intervention plan needs to provide a comparison of student growth from an individual performance baseline and in relation to the progress of peers.

Locations

Numerous RTI plans (especially for middle-school and high-school students) identify a special study hall setting as the targeted intervention. Others assign the health office or the counseling office when students need behavioral or social support. These are not interventions. They are places to go to work on interventions.

If I broke my leg, I would go to the hospital where a medical intervention would be applied. The hospital itself would not fix my issue. Places are not measurable, nor

Chapter 5

Collaborative Problem-Solving



Collaboration is the essence of life. The wind, bees and flowers work together to spread the pollen.

– Amit Ray

Every intervention plan must be individualized to meet each student's learning characteristics and setting demands. Problem-solving is a major component of the process. Every step requires careful deliberation and attention to cultural biases. Teams need to learn, apply, and evaluate their use of the problem-solving process. Effective teams can assess the caliber of their student intervention plans through a reflective team process. A systematic and cyclic progression of planning, implementation and evaluation can maximize student support.

Step 1: Target the Right Issue

When our son Justin was nine years old, he developed chronic issues with his knees. It was frightening to watch him experience episodes of sudden and agonizing pain. Our pediatrician recommended that Justin see an orthopedist, and we quickly complied. The orthopedist recommended knee surgery. My husband and I were reluctant to agree to such drastic measures and sought additional medical advice through a local children's hospital. Eventually, Justin was accurately diagnosed with Lyme Disease, and he was treated effectively through medication and physical therapy. If we had approved the surgery, the real problem would not have been solved.