



[Image description: Group of young children of various racial/ethnic and gender expressions, standing in a circle holding raised hands with their teacher, smiling.]

Equity by Design:

Foundations of Equity-Centered MTSS

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Foundations of Equity-Centered MTSS

Multitier systems of support (MTSS) are widely understood as an evidence-based framework for coordinating integrated delivery of a continuum of layered services to support students' development (Sullivan et al., 2018). Traditionally, MTSS includes three tiers. *Tier 1* refers to universal supports that are system-, school-, or class-wide; *tier 2* includes targeted services beyond general supports; and *tier 3* and beyond provide intensive and sustained individualized services.

Many school systems enact some form of MTSS, with varying foci (e.g., academics, behavior, social-emotional development, mental health, climate, trauma, or some

combination thereof) and features (Freeman et al., 2015; Sugai & Horner, 2020). Common examples of MTSS include response to intervention (RTI) for academic concerns and schoolwide positive behavioral supports (SWPBIS), but integrated academic, social, emotional, and behavioral approaches (e.g., I-MTSS, I-MTSS Research Network, n.d.; Comprehensive Integrated Three-Tiered Model of Prevention [CiT3], Lane et al., 2014) are increasingly recommended to allow for efficient, coordinated supports for students' diverse learning needs. Although equity is identified as a feature or outcome of MTSS, particularly when considered in the context of prevention of racial disproportionality through MTSS (Sullivan et al., 2018), we propose that equity should be more foundational to MTSS design, implementation, and evaluation in order to advance social justice and protect student rights. As such, this *Equity by Design* brief will introduce an expanded conceptualization of *equity-centered MTSS*, describe its key features, provide guided questions to evaluate an existing MTSS system, and identify resources to support this work.

Limitations of MTSS

Many states and school systems seek to reduce special education, discipline, and achievement disparities (e.g., disproportionality in identification or discipline) through MTSS because it has been touted as a way to support more equitable supports and educational decisions (Jackson et al., 2016; Sullivan & Osher, 2019). The underlying assumption is that through provision of research-based universal, targeted, and intensive supports

KEY TERMS

Multitier Systems of Support (MTSS): A framework of data-based decision and service delivery that utilizes screening, progress monitoring, problem solving to inform universal, group, and individualized supports to address the students' educational needs.

Disproportionality: Generally refers to group differences in risk of outcomes such as special education identification or suspension (Sullivan et al., 2018).

Race Neutral: Approaches attempting to address racial disparities without directly providing targeted supports and benefits to racial minority group members (Myers & Ha, 2018)

Color Evasive: Denial of racial differences by emphasizing sameness (Nagayama Hall, n.d.)

Whiteness: "[T]he way white people, their customs, culture and beliefs are the standard by which all other groups are compared" (National Museum of African American History & Culture, n.d., para. 3)

and associated data-based decision-making, students will be provided with more appropriate, higher quality educational experiences. This, in turn, is assumed to allow for ruling out of insufficient opportunities to learn as the determinant of students' educational difficulties.

Yet this rule-out rests on the presumption of the appropriateness and quality of the tiered services for any given student. This is a shaky assumption given both the history and current sociopolitical, cultural, and linguistic context of the educational system for students from racially, culturally, or linguistically minoritized¹ backgrounds (Kohli et al., 2017), as well as those with disabilities (Hehir, 2002) or who are minoritized gender or sexual identities (Kosciw et al., 2020). Simply put, adopting an MTSS framework or specific research-based curricula, programs, or interventions, within and of themselves, do not disrupt the oppressive, marginalizing systems that disadvantage students from minoritized groups (Artiles et al., 2010). This is because no educational context is a neutral base onto which MTSS is added; instead, the local and political contexts in which MTSS is enacted are as important as the research base from which specific practices or procedures are derived (Thorius & Maxcy, 2015). MTSS will not negate the sociopolitical dynamics (e.g., racism, ableism, sexism) of the context.

KEY TERMS (cont.)

Critical Consciousness: The understanding that everyone has biases and those biases shape thought and influence behavior (Skelton, 2015).

Implicit Bias: Unconscious attitudes and stereotypes that affect all individuals' understanding, actions, and decisions that are activated unintentionally and without awareness (Staats et al., 2017).


Critical Pedagogy: Educating using a critical lens and incorporating students' and families' lived experiences and backgrounds in the curriculum (Skelton, 2015).

Critical Reflection: Engagement in self-reflection and active disruption of inequitable assumptions, practices, and policies (Skelton, 2015).

Critical Collaborative Inquiry: "A process that engages students, families, community members, educators and policy makers and facilitates the use of perspectives to move toward equitable learning environments, and data as a mediating tool within that process" (Skelton et al., 2021, p. 3).

Indeed, research suggests MTSS can reproduce marginalization and inequity—or at the very least leaves marginalizing systems and processes in place such that inequity is present in MTSS operations and outcomes. For example, MTSS studies have shown more positive discipline outcomes for white students than racially minoritized students, and little effect on racial disproportionality (e.g., McIntosh et al., 2018); exclusion of students with disabilities and their teachers from planning, professional development (Shuster et al., 2017), and universal supports (Walker et al.,

¹We use the term *minoritized* rather than *minority* to use system-centered language and reflect the social construction, as opposed to numerical basis, of this status (Steward, 2013).



2018); continued or growing disproportionality even where there are improved outcomes at the school or group levels (for discussion, see Thorius & Maxcy, 2015 and Sabnis et al., 2020); and educators' continued reliance on deficit-based discourses, rather than interrogation and modification of contextual contributors, to understand and address students' challenges (Sabnis et al., 2020).

Harms of Deficit-based Assumptions

Deficit-based assumptions surrounding students' challenges are noteworthy. Take for example, behavior management and discipline disparities, a common target of MTSS (Sugai & Horner, 2020).

Exclusionary discipline disparities cannot be attributed to differences in student behaviors (Skiba, 2015). Racially minoritized students—and Black students in particular—experience exclusionary discipline regardless of whether they are participating in disruptive behavior; that is, racial disparities in both frequency and severity of exclusion remain even after controlling for contextual or behavioral variables (Rocque, 2010; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011). A plausible explanation for these patterns is that the process and outcomes are racialized, or grounded in racism, given that studies suggest that the disparities present at each discipline decision-making stage cannot be attributed to the student's behavior (Skiba, 2015). Thus, improving discipline disparities rests with the adults' decisions and reducing bias throughout systems, policies, procedures, and practices, not crafting multitier behavioral supports to change student behavior.

Another common deficit-based assumption that can undermine the equity potential of MTSS is that learning differences stem

from home environments and family engagement. When this assumption informs MTSS, use of the framework is likely oriented around measuring and changing student behavior and structuring families' interactions with educators without concurrent consideration of the ways in which the educational environment is structured to privilege or disadvantage certain some students and families. Alternatively, disparities can be understood as a consequence of systemic inequities that produce opportunity gaps in expectations, relationships, and participation, which in turn shape students' and families' engagement and outcomes (Weeks et al., 2020).

Inadequacy of Race-Neutral Approaches

Taken together, the potential for equity cannot be assured from MTSS's aims without consideration of the assumptions on which supports and educational decisions are based. Without critical analysis of systemic harm and disparities, MTSS will “simply be like old wine in a new bottle, in other words, just another deficit-based approach to sorting children” (Klingner & Edwards, 2006, p. 108). This is because race-neutral approaches can unintentionally perpetuate inequity by leaving unchecked and unchanged the assumptions, norms, and practices through which institutional oppression operates (Sabnis et al., 2020). Furthermore, race-neutral or color-evasive approaches often mean that whiteness is centered implicitly and automatically in educational initiatives, policy, and practice—including MTSS (Sullivan et al., 2021). This is the default in many school settings, and as Carter and colleagues (2017) emphasized, we cannot fix what we do not name. Part of the intractability of institutionalized racism is that individuals contribute to it passively and implicitly; so

we have to be explicit, intentional, proactive, and consistent in disrupting inequity (Valant, 2020), including within the local design, implementation, and evaluation of MTSS. Ultimately, MTSS without explicit attention to equity is often positioned as a neutral initiative to support ‘all learners.’ Neutrality does not equate to equity or fairness. The



[Image description: 3D illustration of a compass with needle pointing the word change. Concept of paradigm shift.]

myth of neutrality, like objectivity, implicitly centers whiteness and perpetuates inequity because that is how the system is designed to operate (Sullivan, 2021). A fundamentally unjust system will remain so without systematic change. Within the context of MTSS, a foundation of disrupting systemic inequity is centering the most minoritized; that is, equity-centered MTSS.

What Does It Mean to Center Equity?

MTSS *may* be a vehicle for advancing equity; however, MTSS alone is not enough if it does not explicitly and consistently center equity as the primary goal. Centering the most marginalized means developing values, norms, and actions based on the goal of creating and sustaining justice. Thus, to center equity in any initiative is to orient around the voices, needs, experiences, and

interests of those marginalized in our current system. Doing so means decentering values, interests, and norms that reproduce and maintain inequity. Central to this is examining how whiteness is centered as the standard, or treated as normative, for learning, behavior, development, and wellness (Sullivan, 2021). This includes critically examining how well-intended efforts can inadvertently perpetuate inequities (Miller et al., 2020). As educators, it is critical to understand that “equity is core to teaching and learning” and has important implications for both student and educator success (Skelton, 2015, 2:27).

To center equity in practice, there are three critical stances that effective educators must take: *critical consciousness*, *critical pedagogy*, and *critical reflection* (Skelton, 2015). Developing a critical consciousness includes engaging in an examination of one’s own biases as well as how power structures (dis)advantage students in school. Biases can be explicit or implicit. In practice, this may include attending to contextual factors within the learning environment such as explicit, hidden/implicit, and null curricula about what is valued and expected by adults. When employing critical pedagogy, educators center their students’ lived experiences and perspectives, encourage students to critically examine society at large, and embed social justice principles within the classroom. Finally, intentional engagement in critical reflection involves self-reflection and active disruption of inequitable practices (Moore et al., 2016). This includes actions such as promoting reflection on personal identities and biases among school staff, genuinely connecting with students and their diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences, and critically examining school data on culture, climate, and disproportionality.

Centering equity is not an end destination but a continual journey (Moore et al., 2021). To be an effective equity-oriented educator requires grounding decisions and actions in understanding the impacts of (in)equity on students, proactive disruption of inequities in the pursuit of social justice, and continuous (re)commitment to centering equity to avoid becoming complicit in reproducing systemic oppression (Moore et al., 2021).

What is Equity-Centered MTSS?

Equity-centered MTSS is the preparation for, and enactment of, tiered supports grounded in critical consciousness, critical pedagogy, and critical reflection. To disrupt systemic inequity, MTSS must be race- and culture-conscious and bias-aware in cultivating systems and practices embedded with social justice principles. Doing so requires consideration of the visible and invisible ways systemic racism, ableism, and other systems of oppression shape initiatives, including building, district, or state-wide planning, professional learning, implementation, and evaluation of local MTSS. This critical orientation should be applied to all aspects of MTSS. As such, the following are critical elements of equity-centered MTSS that differentiate it from less critical iterations of it.

Critical Consciousness and Reflection

First, MTSS leaders and educators must develop critical consciousness. Critical consciousness creates a foundation for disrupting whiteness-centering and color-evasive approaches. This includes educators' awareness of their explicit and implicit biases (Newell & Kratochwill, 2007; Sabnis et al., 2020). This often necessitates questioning one's culturally-based assumptions and biases about learning, teaching, behavior, wellness, development,

and educational processes. It should also involve considering the power dynamics that systematically disadvantage minoritized learners, families, and other stakeholder in MTSS leadership, professional development, data-based decision-making, and tiered services. For example, critical consciousness applied to social, emotional, or behavioral MTSS might entail awareness of ones' biases about what constitutes 'appropriate,' 'problematic,' 'normal,' 'natural,' and 'disordered' behavior and expression. Other targets for consideration include



[Image description: Illustration of the profile of a human head, with two smaller, overlapping heads in it's proverbial mind. Introspection and self-observation icon.]

assumptions of individual versus collective responsibility, culpability, and entitlement to care and support; as well as consideration of the roles of surveillance, control, punishment, and exclusion in seeking to shape student behavior. Furthermore, in identifying contextually appropriate supports within MTSS, it is important to examine presumed universality versus cultural-specificity of assessments and instructional practices (Newell & Kratochwill, 2007). Doing so is likely to

reveal racialized, gendered, ableist assumptions that limit the potential for equity in MTSS, and help to identify crucial targets for changes in policies, procedures, and practices.

Second, critical reflection entails (a) understanding one's intersectional identity, power, and privilege; (b) disassembling the assumptions, attitudes, and practices that perpetuate marginalization of students, families, and other stakeholders from minoritized backgrounds; (c) practicing curiosity about the experiences, identities, and cultures represented in a school community; and (d) considering dynamics of power and privilege in MTSS leadership, decision making, assessment, and tiered supports. Some guiding questions include:

- How are learning, development, and associated problems understood?
- What knowledge is considered meaningful? What is excluded and why?
- Whose voices have been privileged? Whose worldviews, values, and aims informed policy, practice, and procedures? Who is excluded and why?
- How are policies and procedures (un) intentionally discriminatory? How do they systematically negatively affect certain groups?

These are complicated questions to unpack. More targeted considerations may be applied to specific aspects of MTSS to facilitate critical reflection and resulting action. Below, we present three foundational areas for consideration.

Leadership for Equity

In equity-centered MTSS, the individuals included in all facets of the process matter for the framework's equity potential. MTSS leadership should center and elevate the voices of minoritized members of the school community, including families and students from marginalized groups. Students with disabilities, and their families and service providers, should be included in all aspects of planning, design, and evaluation. Models such as critical collaborative inquiry (Skelton et al., 2021) can support engagement and centering of diverse perspectives.

Ask the following questions to examine your current efforts to engage stakeholders:

- Who is centered and who is marginalized in these conversations and decisions?
- How are differences in race, culture, language, and disability represented in:
 - ◊ Leadership team?
 - ◊ Universal/Tier 1 planning, professional learning, and program evaluation?
 - ◊ Research and evaluation used to guide assessment and intervention selection?
- What processes do you have in place to solicit feedback on policies and procedures from all stakeholders, specifically those marginalized backgrounds?
- To what extent does your school administration and staff reflect the demographics of your students and families?
- How comfortable are students and families engaging with various individuals at the school?
- How is student leadership prioritized within your MTSS initiative?

Aligning Language with Intent

Language usage in equity-centered MTSS matters. The goal of MTSS is not to group students or to label them according to particular data or metrics; labels shape educators, students, and families' expectations, perceptions, and behaviors. Thus, we should not refer to students by a tier (e.g., Tier 2 student) or their behaviors (e.g., an externalizer), as it does not define who they are or appropriate educational decisions or supports. Students are multifaceted individuals with varied, dynamic strengths and needs (Sugai & Horner, 2010). MTSS is meant to be a continuum operating fluidly where students can receive different types of support as needed. Reflect on potential impacts of language usage in your school with the following questions:

- What do you believe the implementation of MTSS in your school accomplishes?
 - ◊ What are your goals and theory of change?
 - ◊ Is there collective agreement among diverse stakeholder groups about the purpose and need for MTSS?
 - * If no, what are the differences in opinion?
 - * If yes, what is the purpose and need for MTSS?
- To what extent does your MTSS process implicitly or explicitly encourage labeling/categorizing students?
- How do individuals in your school discuss processes or students relative to MTSS? What does this indicate about assumptions and biases?
- How do students and families perceive and discuss MTSS in the school?
- How does the language used around MTSS reflect deficit-based or strengths-based assumptions and processes?

Policies and Practices for Equity

Equity-centered MTSS ensures all students have access to the support they need to succeed in all facets of schooling and beyond. Consider the following questions to assess the extent of your practices in promoting inclusion:

- How are we actualizing the aim and potential of MTSS to support every student?
- How do we know we are constructing efforts to support every learner?
- When we assume something works, or that it will work for 'most,' who are we talking about and who are we leaving out both explicitly and implicitly?
- To what extent do our processes and materials:
 - ◊ Confront racism?
 - ◊ Honor cultural and linguistic differences within the school community?
 - ◊ Include students with disabilities, their families, and special educators throughout Tier 1?
- How are data used to identify and understand disparities?
 - ◊ What are the different data sources used? How do they honor varied ways of knowing?
 - ◊ How are data disaggregated? How are disaggregated data used? What do they tell us about system functioning?
- How are voices, needs, and experiences of students and families, particularly those from minoritized backgrounds, informing data-based decision-making?
- How do we assess and determine fidelity to our equity-center?

Working through these questions can help to identify areas for growth and improvement to advance equity and social justice, including expanding leadership to include all communities and groups represented in the school, amplifying voices of minoritized students and families. Education stakeholders should be consistently engaged in collaborative leadership and data reviews to support data-based decision-making processes that move beyond the common focus of within-student deficits. This should include consideration of how ecological features of the school environment—e.g., instruction, climate, curriculum, relationships, integration of supports—may contribute to different trends and patterns reflected in universal screening or other assessment data.



[Image description: Masculine-presenting Black child on black background with light bulb and question marks above their head. Brainstorming and idea concept.]

Finally, critical pedagogy involves structuring MTSS processes and supports to empower students and families, develop students' critical consciousness and capacity for critical reflection and supporting students in identifying and challenging inequities through individual and collective liberatory action. This also entails use of differentiated

instruction that leverages students' perspectives and lived experiences, and reflects their diverse social identities, to support their learning.

Conclusion

MTSS is an increasingly common framework enacted in US school systems. Although commonly used to address equity concerns, we have argued here that without explicit centering of equity and grounding in critical consciousness, MTSS initiatives may not advance equity as intended. The recommendations above are designed to support professional effort to make equity foundational to MTSS design, implementation, and evaluation in order to protect student rights and advance social justice.

Suggested Resources

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About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

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