Revisiting the Regular Education Initiative: Multi-tiered Systems of Support Can Strengthen the Connection Between General and Special Education

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Abstract

In 1986 Madeleine Will proposed the Regular Education Initiative (REI) to share possibilities for eliminating the divide between general and special education. Although great strides have been made over the past several decades in regard to the inclusion of students with disabilities, a significant divide between general and special education still exists. The purpose of this article is to discuss how multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) models for implementing evidence-based instruction to students with and without disabilities are used to create a culture of inclusive practices that encourage collaboration between general and special education. We offer suggestions for schools looking to establish and/or strengthen a model that is both cohesive and integrated.

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In the mid 1980's when Madeleine Will was serving as the United States Department of Education Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, she published a landmark manuscript entitled "Educating Students with Learning Problems: A Shared Responsibility" (Will, 1986). This publication paved the way for the Regular Education Initiative (REI), which encouraged educators to re-conceptualize the way special education services are delivered. The main call to action suggested by the REI was for schools to eliminate the divide between general and special education to better serve students with disabilities and other struggling learners. Will's (1986) vision described what true collaboration and integration should encompass and how the skill sets and expertise of general and special educators should compliment one another to deliver high quality, evidence-based, differentiated instruction to all students.

Unfortunately, there was not global embracement of the REI at national, state, and local levels across the United States. Opponents of the REI argued that it was a method for replacing special education and expressed concern that students with disabilities would not receive the individualized services and supports they needed (Mostert, 1991). However, the vision of the REI was not to take away specialized instruction, it was to deliver this instruction in general education classrooms through the collaboration of general and special education teachers. Will argued that special education should not be thought of as a "place," but the coordination of services and supports to promote the learning of students with disabilities. There could be many reasons why there was misinterpretation of the message behind Madeleine Will's manuscript and

the REI. Possibly the name "Regular Education Initiative" led people to believe that proponents of the REI were suggesting that students with disabilities simply needed to receive the same instructional approaches as their non-disabled peers. In other words, the unfounded belief that specialized instruction could only take place in segregated settings may have led opponents to action against the REI.

Although the REI was never completely brought to fruition, it certainly led to great strides in the delivery of inclusive practices. More students with disabilities are now receiving instruction in general education classrooms alongside their typically developing peers than they were when the manuscript was published (McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, & Hoppey, 2012). However, the divide between general education and special education still exists. Self-contained classrooms and resource rooms continue to be the places in which many students with disabilities receive their specialized instruction and supports. As Will suggested long ago, pulling students out of general education and placing them in other educational settings is based on a myth that underperformance is explained solely in terms of deficiencies in the learner rather than deficiencies in the classroom environment (Will, 1986). In actuality, when there is true collaboration between general and special educators to effectively include students with disabilities through the use of evidence-based instructional practices, students with disabilities demonstrate greater academic gains compared to students served in self-contained settings (Cole, Waldon, & Majd, 2004; Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013; Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012; Kurth & Mastergeorge, 2010).

If published today, the REI manuscript would likely have a different, more positive, interpretation than it had in 1986. Through of the expansion of inclusive practices over the last several decades, it has been shown that the delivery of specialized services can certainly occur in general education classrooms. For example, inclusive movements led to the development and advocacy for co-teaching approaches when delivering services and supports to students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Cook & Friend, 1995). Additionally, in the late 1990's professional development initiatives began to focus on the use of differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 1999) and universal design for learning (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 1998) to meet the needs of diverse learners in inclusive classrooms. In recent years, the implementation of positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) to improve student behavior is widely used across the country providing educators with additional strategies and approaches to successfully include students with behavioral challenges (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010).

Today, many states and school districts are using multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) frameworks, combining response to intervention and PBIS initiatives into one comprehensive academic and behavioral support model. This comprehensive approach to addressing academic and behavioral concerns can potentially have the greatest impact on eliminating the divide between general and special education. When implementing MTSS, the aim is to deliver effective instruction to all students and increase the level of academic and behavioral support for some learners based on needs identified through screening and progress monitoring (Copeland & Cosbey, 2008). Because the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) encourages the use of student responses to evidence-based instruction as a formal part of the disability identification process, most states are implementing MTSS models to provide

intervention and support to struggling learners (Prasse, Breunlin, Giroux, Hunt, Morrison, et al. 2012).

Revisiting the REI Through an MTSS Lens

In her manuscript, Madeleine Will shared four main strategies to minimize the significant divide between general and special education. These include: 1) empower principals to control all programs and resources at the building levels; 2) provide a support system for general education teachers; 3) use successful instructional approaches to address the needs of students with disabilities; and 4) increase instructional time in classrooms to support learners with disabilities (Will, 1986). In direct alignment with Will's recommendations, MTSS focuses on empowering principals to align the appropriate levels of academic and behavioral supports students need to be successful with an emphasis on increasing instructional time in classrooms, providing support systems for general education teachers, and using evidence-based instructional practices to address challenges and improve student learning. The sections that follow discuss how the use of MTSS models for implementing evidence-based instruction to students with and without disabilities can create a culture of inclusive practices that encourage collaboration between general and special education. Each section includes suggestions for schools looking to establish and/or strengthen a model that is both cohesive and integrated.

Empowering Principals

The individuals who are likely to make the greatest impact on reducing the divide between general and special education are school administrators (Ainscow & Sandhill, 2010; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). These leaders play a key role in shaping the vision of collaboration in their schools, holding educators accountable for fulfilling the vision, and supporting teachers in the implementation of collaborative instructional practices. While district-level special education administrators should guide and support school administrators as they work on blending the programs and resources in the school to support more students effectively in inclusive classrooms, the building level administrators must have authority to make decisions related to service delivery options.

Many general educators still view response to intervention and MTSS as special education initiatives, in contrast to special education teachers who generally understand these frameworks as initiatives to meet the needs of all learners (Gallagher & Coleman, 2009). Fortunately, school-based administrators do have authority over MTSS implementation decisions. Thus, they have the power to reshape the way general education teachers view tiered support systems that moves them to understanding and valuing the impact that collaboration and co-teaching with special educators can have on the learning of all students. The most common MTSS model being used is the three-tiered system that was originally introduced through PBIS and response to intervention frameworks. This system includes the delivery of universal instruction for all students (Tier I), targeted intervention and supports for some students who require additional supports and/or specialized instruction (Tier II), and individualized interventions and supports for the few students who continue to require intensive specialized instruction (Tier III) (Shinn, 2013). Principals need to systematically plan how these tiered supports are delivered, however, so that MTSS does not become one more way to provide segregated services. For example, instead of providing specialized interventions at tier two and three levels using pullout approaches, it is best

to layer these supports within the structure of general education classrooms through the collaboration and co-teaching of general and special education teachers. When this approach is utilized, students with disabilities, students at-risk, students performing on grade level, and students performing above grade level can all receive the differentiated instruction they need to thrive academically and behaviorally. Below are recommendations for school-based administrators to consider as they design and evaluate MTSS models to move toward increased collaboration and co-teaching between general and special education teachers:

1. Research models of MTSS and co-teaching to determine how the models can be implemented across the content and settings in the school. Murawski and Hughes (2009) provide a thorough review of the different co-teaching models used to enhance the delivery of tiered interventions in general education classrooms.
2. Involve the School Leadership Team in the design of the school's MTSS model. Ensure each member of the team can articulate how the model works. Include this information in the School Improvement Plan, and communicate the details about the MTSS model to all faculty and staff.
3. Identify ways to assess how the model is working. For example, include specific items on walk-through observation forms, survey teachers and support staff, and develop systems for analyzing student growth. Designate specific times to review the information and make informed revisions as needed.

Support Systems for General Education Teachers

The original purpose of response to intervention was to deliver evidence-based interventions with different levels of intensity and progress monitoring (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003). The goal was to decrease the necessity for special education referrals for students who respond well to the interventions and open the doorway to earlier identification of students who continue to need intensive academic and/or behavioral supports. Schools can take this a step further with MTSS by viewing these tiered supports as opportunities to effectively include more students with disabilities in general education classrooms and better meet the needs of advanced and gifted learners. To do so, however, we must create structures of support within general education classrooms utilizing special education teachers, teachers of gifted students, curriculum coaches, literacy coaches, behavior specialists, speech and language pathologists, and other related service providers as collaborators. It is unwise to expect general education teachers to implement the diversified and intensive interventions that some students may need without the shared responsibility with other professionals.

As more and more general education teachers have opportunities to collaborate and co-teach with special education teachers and other instructional support personnel, they will increasingly enhance their use of evidence based practices to meet the needs of their current and future students (McDuffie, Scruggs, & Mastropieri, 2007). This continued professional development will not eliminate the need for co-teaching in the classroom. However, it may make the planning and delivery of interventions more efficient and effective, reduce teacher stress, and increase teacher competence and confidence in meeting the needs of all learners. Likewise, when special education teachers have opportunities to co-teach with general education teachers, they learn more about the general education curriculum and ways to engage learners in instructional

activities to address the national and state standards (McDuffie et al., 2007). Ultimately, if MTSS models increase collaboration in schools, general education teachers, special education teachers, and other school-based professionals will receive the support systems they need to effectively reach and teach the students they serve. Below are recommendations school-based administrators can consider when creating support systems for general education teachers:

1. Talk with faculty and staff regarding their beliefs about inclusion, experiences with inclusion, potential barriers, specific needs of teachers in order to be successful implementing these models, etc. This can aid in the decision making process and create buy-in for an inclusive model that is effective and sustainable.

2. Match professional development to the specific needs of the school. Be sure there is time for the general and special education teachers to work together to plan and monitor the instructional program. Additionally, administrators can participate in these professional development experiences. This will send the message to faculty and staff that the experiences are essential to the improvement of the school.

3. Clearly articulate the roles of the general and special education teachers in the co-teaching model. Allow time for the teachers to build rapport, plan together, and create individualized systems for monitoring student progress to inform instructional decisions.

Evidence-Based Practices and Increased Instructional Time

Often, when students with disabilities fail to thrive in general education classrooms, they go to special education classrooms to receive specialized, evidence-based instruction. In other words, students experience failure and then receive instruction to help them learn skills and concepts they were unable to learn in the general education classroom. When students with disabilities receive their special education services and supports using pullout models, there is significant loss of instructional time. For example, students must transition back and forth from the general education classroom to the special education classroom. Also, when students with disabilities receive their instructional interventions and supports outside of the general education classroom, instructional time in the general education classroom is typically not fully utilized. With the use of pullout models, general education teachers receive minimal support from special education teachers to ensure that instructional time in the classroom is best utilized to promote student learning. However, if general education and special education teachers are co-planning and co-teaching lessons using differentiated instruction and evidence-based practices, they are able to take full advantage of instructional time in the classroom.

MTSS frameworks focus on the use of evidence-based practices when teaching all learners in all classroom settings. If collaboration exists between general education and special education, these teachers can work alongside one another to implement evidence-based instructional practices at tier one, two, and three levels to deliver quality instruction within general education classrooms. This model prevents students with disabilities from experiencing failure before having the opportunity to receive evidence-based instruction. Instead, general education and special education teachers utilize evidence-based instructional practices to improve student learning

when delivering literacy, math, and content area instruction. While general education teachers have the content expertise in regards to subject matter, special education teachers have expertise related to evidence-based instructional practices that will promote student learning across the content areas. Thus, bringing together content specialists and intervention specialists promotes the delivery of instruction that is based on empirical research to address the learning needs in diverse classrooms. Finally, teachers should select practices that will enable them to teach more in less time (Konrad, Helf, & Joseph, 2011). This may include examining the grouping arrangements for instruction and strategies for increasing student opportunities to respond. Increased instructional time will have a positive impact on the learning of students with and without disabilities. Below are recommendations for increasing the use of evidence-based practices and optimizing instructional time in general education classrooms:

1. When planning the master schedule, make strategic decisions in order to make the most of the school's resources (e.g., time, staff). Consider how grade levels can block their instructional content to most effectively and efficiently use the support staff to implement the instructional program. Be sure there is joint planning time for general and special education teachers. Ensure that general and special education teachers have joint opportunities for professional development.

2. There is evidence that teachers' participation in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) improves student learning (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). As you select topics for study, consider how they fit with the vision for MTSS and inclusive practices. Ensure that general and special education teachers participate in the PLCs together.

3. Utilize support staff (e.g., assistant principal for instruction, curriculum coach, literacy facilitator) to build capacity and help teachers focus on achieving the school's vision. These leaders can (a) provide on-going training related to the school's MTSS framework; (b) ensure that decision making is collaborative, systematic, and used by teachers to monitor student progress and plan future instruction; (c) bring together teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff when common challenges are observed; (d) find ways to recognize effectiveness and build capacity at the school level (e.g., have teachers excelling in specific instructional practices serve as models for others and arrange schedules to allow teachers to observe those practices in action).

Conclusion

It is important to examine existing barriers that may be preventing a greater unification of general and special education. Considerations for alternatives to funding structures that support collaborative efforts must be at the forefront. While a small portion of special education funds are currently being allotted for early intervening services such as response to intervention and MTSS, there is not an existing funding structure that encourages school districts to utilize special education teachers to work in collaboration with general education teachers to support all learners. Given the evidence that general education students benefit academically and socially from inclusive classrooms that utilize inclusive service delivery models, it is time to devise creative solutions across departments in order to fund the additional teaching staff necessary to support inclusive schools and classrooms.

Additionally, belief systems create obstacles for advancement. Although decades of research indicate positive academic, behavioral, and social outcomes of inclusive education, there are still special educators, general educators, administrators, and parents who believe students with disabilities are better served in segregated settings. The question is, though, are they "better" served in segregated settings or is it easier to serve them in segregated settings? If the latter is true, are we providing special segregation as opposed to special education?

True collaboration leading to high-quality, effective instruction does not come easily to all educators. Innovative professional development opportunities for in-service teachers and transformations to teacher education programs must take place to support the development of general and special educators who are equipped with the required collaboration skills, pedagogical expertise, and knowledge of evidence-based instructional practices to effectively meet the needs of all learners. It is time to generate solutions to barriers and be more progressive in our inclusive education efforts. Leaders in education should revisit Madeleine Will's Regular Education Initiative to guide efforts to eliminate the divide between general education and special education for the purpose of enhancing the learning of students with and without disabilities.

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