

# The Value of Short-Duration Lessons to Intensify Instruction in Tiered Intervention Frameworks

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**Abbreviations:** MTSS: Multi-Tiered System of Supports; RTI: Response to Intervention; SWPBIS: School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports; NCII: National Center on Intensive Intervention

## Introduction

In the United States, many public schools use an organizational scheme to account for the performance of every student, and then provide each student with requisite instructional services from the school's system of interventions. The scheme is referred to by different names, including multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), response to intervention (RTI), and school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS). Additionally, the scheme may focus on each student's academic achievement, social/emotional learning, engagement in proper school social behaviors, or a combination of all three [1]. Be that as it may, for the sake of clarity, this manuscript discusses these schemes with respect to their focus on students' academic achievement.

Regardless of the different names and focal points, the fundamental structure and functioning of each scheme is similar. The structure is based on what is called a tiered intervention framework, which consists of three tiers. The first tier, which serves as the foundation of the framework, involves instruction that is presented to all students and is designed to enable them to achieve grade-level academic achievement standards. Thus, Tier 1 consists of the instruction that is provided in a general education classroom. This instruction is often depicted as high-quality instruction, which means that appropriate curriculum content is taught with evidence-based practices.

Tier 2 interventions consist of supplemental instruction that is provided to students who are demonstrating academic

achievement deficits despite receiving high-quality, Tier 1 instruction. Tier 2 interventions are supplemental in that a student who receives them continues to receive all Tier 1 instruction while also receiving Tier 2 instruction [2]. Estimates are that 15%-20% of the students in a school will need to receive Tier 2 services [3], with the intent being that these services will remediate a student's academic achievement deficit such that the student will only need to receive Tier 1 instruction afterwards. Yet, data indicate that Tier 2 services will not produce this outcome for 3%-5% of a school's students, who will need additional remedial instruction [4]. These students are characterized as demonstrating significant, persistent academic achievement deficits and, therefore, need to receive the next tier of supplemental instruction, which is Tier 3.

A central aspect of the three-tier organizational scheme is what is referred to as the intensification of instruction. Intensification involves adapting instruction by manipulating alterable variables such that the resulting intervention is more individualized for a student than the preceding instruction [5]. When a student needs to be provided Tier 2 instruction, that instruction results from adaptations that are made to the Tier 1 instruction the student has been provided, whereas a student's Tier 3 instruction results from adaptations that are made to the student's Tier 2 instruction. For instance, a common adaptation for the purpose of creating a Tier 2 intervention is to increase the dosage – or total amount of time - a student receives the high-quality instruction that is being presented in the general education classroom. Hence, this means

the student receives the high-quality instruction for a longer period each school day than was the case previously (e.g., the student receives 20 more minutes of this instruction each day).

Examples of alterable variables that can be manipulated for the purpose of increasing the intensity of a student's instruction include those listed below.

- The time a student spends in an instructional session and the number of instructional sessions the student is provided with each week.
- The size of the instructional group as well as its diversity in terms of the content that is taught. More intensive instruction would involve students being placed in a smaller group in which they work on the exact same academic content rather than participate as a member of a group in which two or more different learning objectives are taught because the students need to master different objectives.
- The number of opportunities to respond, and receive immediate feedback, during an instructional session.
- The instructor's expertise and experience. Instruction can be made more intensive when an instructor with more expertise and experience teaching the subject matter leads the lesson. The instructor's expertise and experience have a higher probability of resulting in individualized, effective instruction for a student [6].

The circumstances just described, particularly the intensification of instruction that consists of a student spending time in supplemental Tier 2 or Tier 3 instruction while simultaneously participating in all of the Tier 1 instruction in the student's general education classroom, highlight a central challenge schools face in intensifying instruction using a system of interventions: establishing a master schedule that accounts for some students' needs to receive supplemental Tier 2 or Tier 3 instruction. Specifically, the challenge is scheduling supplemental instruction that often lasts 20 minutes or longer and is intended to allow a student to continue receiving all the Tier 1 instruction that is presented in a general education classroom. A solution to this challenge consists of (a) the identification of short periods of time within a school's existing master schedule when a teacher could present more intensive instruction to the students who need it, as well as (b) establishing how this instruction should be designed.

Weingarten et al. [7] provided guidance for the identification of time within the master daily schedule when a short-duration lesson, which is defined as a lesson lasting from 1-10 minutes, might be conducted. These opportunities include (a) transitions between scheduled activities, (b) times when all of the students in a classroom have been directed to complete independent seatwork or center-based activities in small groups without assistance from the teacher, (c) when non-academic activities (e.g., lunch break) occur, and (d) right before the school day officially starts or after it

ends and students are waiting to depart.

Regarding how this instruction should be designed, an explicit instruction framework allows for an appropriate evidence-based approach. Archer and Hughes [8] documented the extensive research support for its use with students demonstrating academic achievement deficits, while Maag [9] noted its effectiveness with students with disabilities. Many teachers are aware of this approach when it is explained as the three-part "I do, we do, you do" sequence for presenting instruction during a typical 60–120-minute language arts or mathematics block. Yet, the National Center on Intensive Intervention (NCII) in the United States has provided detailed guidance on how the explicit instruction framework can be configured so that it meets the needs of teachers who must present intensive instruction to students demonstrating significant, persistent academic achievement deficits, and need many opportunities to respond followed by immediate, behavior-specific feedback [10].

The core components of NCII's explicit instruction framework are (a) the teacher's presentation of a clear learning objective that informs the student about the task he will be able to perform because of participating in the lesson, (b) teacher modeling of the task, (c) student practice (i.e., guided, and independent practice), and (d) the teacher's use of supporting practices throughout a lesson. These supporting practices include eliciting student responses and providing students with immediate, behavior-specific feedback. Importantly, teachers are encouraged to configure the framework such that it addresses the teacher's particular circumstances. For instance, during the very first lesson when a student is being taught a new skill, the teacher may present extensive modeling and only a limited amount of guided practice, but no independent practice. This type of flexibility, along with the vast research supporting its effectiveness, makes the structure of the explicit instruction approach ideal for the types of short-duration lessons described here.

The relevance of conducting these short-duration lessons is their cumulative impact across an entire school year. Based on a 180-day annual school calendar, a 5-minute daily lesson would result in 15 hours of instruction across an entire school year. By extension, 10 minutes of daily instruction would result in 30 hours of instruction across an entire school year. Furthermore, if the short-duration lessons were constructed such that they afforded a student many opportunities to respond, this circumstance would address these students' needs to engage in 10-30 more practice opportunities to master a targeted learning outcome relative to the number of practice opportunities needed by a peer who demonstrates academic achievement at a rate that aligns with her school's curriculum pacing guide [11]. In one study in which the students received 10 minutes of this type of explicit instruction daily, the projected number of opportunities to respond and receive immediate behavior-specific feedback - across a 180-day school year - exceeded 1,000 trials [12].

Additional important features of these short-duration lessons are that they can address (a) the needs of students who require either Tier 2 or Tier 3 services and (b) involve targeted learning outcomes that consist of discrete and procedural tasks. Overall, the lessons provide every teacher with an option to consider that, heretofore, likely has not been addressed in any of their professional learning experiences that has focused on tiered intervention frameworks.

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