

Tiered Intervention Frameworks and the Challenge of Intensifying Instruction

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Introduction

Tiered intervention frameworks are organizational schemes designed to match a school's system of interventions with each student's instructional needs [1]. The frameworks address three areas: academic, social emotional, and behavioral needs [2]. For clarity, this paper focuses on students' academic instructional needs. In particular, the paper addresses the concept of intervention intensification within a tiered intervention framework. First, a basic three-tier intervention framework is described, followed by an explanation of the concept of intervention intensification.

Three-Tiered Intervention Framework

A frequently referenced framework is organized into three categories defined by the type of interventions provided and their purpose. These categories, referred to as tiers, are explained next.

- Tier 1. This tier consists of what is referred to as high-quality instruction presented to all students in general education classrooms to enable them to achieve grade-level core curriculum academic standards. Tier 1 instruction has been posited to be effective with 80% or more of the students [3].

- Tier 2 involves targeted, supplemental instruction to students who have not mastered the core curriculum academic standards after receiving Tier 1 instruction. In this context, targeted means students are taught specific core curriculum content they have not mastered after receiving Tier 1 instruction, while supplemental means they continue to receive Tier 1 instruction. Estimates are that 20% of students must receive Tier 2 interventions, which are based on standard programs or a problem-solving approach.

- Tier 3, which will include 3%-5% of a school's students, consists of another type of supplemental instruction that is presented to students for whom Tier 2 instruction, along with Tier 1 instruction, does not resolve their academic achievement deficits, resulting in what is characterized as a significant, persistent academic achievement deficit. It is significant because the student may be performing several or more (i.e., 3-4) years behind their age-designated grade level and persistent in that it has not been resolved. Thus, the student is characterized as a non-responder or treatment resistor [4].

A pyramid is often used to present a graphic depiction of a three-tier model. Tier 1 is at the bottom to indicate that it serves as the foundation of a tiered intervention framework, while Tier 2 sits atop it and Tier 3 atop Tier 2. Hence, these two tiers are sometimes referred to as higher-level tiers. The model is described as a preventative approach because it seeks to prevent the provision of costly, highly individualized interventions to students whose needs could be met otherwise. When robust Tier 1 and well-functioning Tier 2 interventions are provided, the academic achievement deficits of nearly all students are remediated [5].

Conceptually, tiered intervention frameworks are an equitable approach to presenting instruction. Previously, when their school did not use a framework, some students did not receive remedial services until they were determined eligible for special education services. Students demonstrating a significant, persistent academic achievement deficit but not determined eligible for special education services may not have received any systematic remedial instruction. While tiered intervention frameworks have proved effective, their implementation can be problematic [6].

Schools face practical challenges to the implementation of a tiered intervention framework, such as frequent staff turnover, lack of access to appropriate instructional materials, and a staff's need to acquire fundamental knowledge about critical features of their school's framework and the skills to address these features [7].

Intervention intensification is a key feature of every tiered intervention framework, which occurs as students move to the higher-level tiers: Tier 2 and Tier 3. Intensification refers to adjusting alterable variables so that a student receives more individualized instruction than that presented previously. This outcome is referred to as more intensive instruction. Intensification is achieved through a data-driven process resulting in a high level of confidence that the intensified instruction will be more effective than previous instruction. Even though intervention intensification is a critical feature of every tiered intervention framework, it may not be well understood. For instance, Braun et al. [6], in their study of the implementation of tiered intervention frameworks across urban schools in the United States, reported that teachers stated they needed to learn more about intensive instruction. Hence, the remainder of this paper focuses on conceptualizing intensifying instruction.

Conceptualizing Intensive Instruction

As was stated previously, when instruction is intensified, it is made more individualized for a student. In this context, the term individualized carries the same meaning as it does in a federal law in the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which directs the provision of special education services to students with disabilities in K-12 schools. Specifically, in the IDEA, individualized refers to addressing a student's instructional needs with proper services. It does not automatically mean the services will be provided in a one-on-one instructional arrangement. However, this arrangement may be used in certain circumstances. Intensive instruction is a relative term because making instruction more intensive is based on the instruction a student has been provided. That is to say, the current instruction is adapted based on a student's performance data and educators' professional judgments. Adaptations result from the manipulation of alterable variables that can be addressed by school personnel.

When a student begins receiving Tier 2 services, the two alterable variables most often manipulated are (a) dosage and (b) group size. Dosage involves increasing a student's academic learning time by lengthening the time of each Tier 2 session and/or the number of sessions per week. Group size concerns the pupil-to-teacher ratio during a lesson. Instruction is intensified when a lower pupil-to-teacher ratio is involved. Ideally, the pupil-to-teacher ratio for Tier 2 is 3-7:1, and for Tier 3, it is 1-3:1 [8]. Noteworthy is that with these adaptations, a student may experience only a slight change to Tier 1 instruction. That is to say, the content taught might remain the same, while the change in group size allows for more practice opportunities followed

by immediate, behavior-specific feedback. Increasing students' practice opportunities and a teacher's presentation of immediate, behavior-specific feedback are examples of other stand-alone alterable variables. As teachers understand these relatively simple, minor instructional adaptations, they will further their conceptualization of intervention intensification.

Additional alterable variables have been identified by Fuchs et al. [9] in their Taxonomy of Intervention Intensity. The taxonomy provides a way to organize one's thinking about alterable variables. A brief introduction to all but one of the taxonomy's categories (i.e., strength) is presented next. The reader can refer to Fuchs et al. [9] and the National Center on Intensive Intervention (n.d.) [10] for a more in-depth explanation of the taxonomy.

- **Dosage.** This component involves a student's time in instruction. Ways to increase a student's dosage include extending the time of each instructional session and having more sessions per week. Both changes should permit increasing the student's number of practice opportunities followed by the teacher's provision of immediate, behavior-specific feedback.
- **Alignment.** Alignment seeks to increase instructional efficiency by ensuring students are taught grade-level core curriculum academic standards they need to learn and are not spending time receiving instruction about academic skills they have mastered.
- **Attention to transfer.** Meaningful transfer occurs when students can perform what is learned across other formats and circumstances, thereby eliminating re-teaching skills in new formats and circumstances. Transfer also occurs when students make connections between mastered and related skills.
- **Comprehensiveness.** Comprehensiveness involves using as many of the principles of explicit instruction as is appropriate. Examples of the principles include teacher modeling, teacher support that is systematically faded, sufficient practice opportunities, and periodic cumulative reviews.
- **Behavior support.** Behavior support refers to a student's self-regulation and executive functioning abilities (e.g., the demonstration of perseverance and high standards of coherence, such as asking oneself whether an answer makes sense). When necessary, behavior supports are employed to eliminate non-productive behaviors.
- **Individualization.** This involves establishing a year-end goal and adjusting a student's instruction via a recursive, data-based process called data-based individualization (DBI).

Similarly, Vaughn and Zumeta [11] presented an organizational scheme for classifying alterable variables involved in intensifying instruction and identified numerous stand-alone variables. Vaughn and Zumeta's four categories and examples of the alterable variables within the categories are listed below.

- Change dosage or time: Increase the time per session; Provide the student with more opportunities to respond.
- Change the learning environment to promote attention and engagement: Change the instructional setting to reduce noise and other distractions; Implement strategies that promote attention and engagement, such as a protocol a student is to follow to keep working while waiting for teacher assistance.
- Combining cognitive processing strategies with academic learning: Review prior learning before presenting new information; Check frequently for understanding.
- Modify delivery of instruction: Use precise and simple language; Be systematic, meaning follow a logical order when presenting instruction.

More information about alterable variables not covered in this paper is available from Harlacher [12].

Conclusion

A simple, straightforward way to begin conceptualizing instructional intensification is to consider how Tier 1 instruction can be presented more often to a smaller group of students. Of course, whether this manner of intensifying instruction is appropriate for a student is another consideration. If there is reason to believe that the existing Tier 1 instruction will likely be ineffective, then increasing its dosage in a smaller group is irrelevant. However, changing group size, alone, can readily enable teachers to consider numerous other variables they can alter. Each alteration, meaning the adaptation of an alterable variable, produces more intensification than has previously been realized. In this paper, numerous variables have been identified and discussed, providing the reader with ways to further their understanding of intensive instruction and begin intensifying instruction for students who need it.

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