

# Perspectives on Intensifying Instruction and Special Education in a Tiered Intervention Framework

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**Submission:** May 28, 2024; **Published:** June 07, 2024

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**Keywords:** Special Education; Tiered Intervention Framework; Accountability Systems

**Abbreviations:** RTI: Response to Intervention; PBIS: Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports; MTSS: Multi-Tiered System of Supports; IDEA: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; ESSA: Every Student Succeeds Act; IEP: Individualized Education Program

## Introduction

In the United States, some schools have developed accountability systems to ensure that their students are provided interventions that match their needs and that the school is equipped to monitor their progress. Given how the systems have been depicted graphically, they are referred to as tiered intervention frameworks. While there are unique names for some frameworks, including response to intervention (RTI), positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), and multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS), they have the same organizational structure. Furthermore, frameworks have been developed to address students' academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs [1]. Yet, for clarity, this paper only addresses frameworks that address students' academic needs.

Another commonality across these schoolwide systems is the intensification of instruction. Intensifying instruction refers to adapting a student's current instruction by changing alterable variables so that the student is provided instruction that proves to be more effective than the previous instruction. Yet, despite its centrality in tiered intervention frameworks, educators have reported needing more information about intensifying instruction [2].

Likewise, schools grapple with the fit of special education services within a tiered intervention framework [3]. Special education is defined as specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a student with a disability [4]. Consequently, the special education services provided to a student are individualized,

just as intensifying instruction results in individualized instruction. However, the purpose of individualizing instruction within a tiered intervention framework is often markedly different than that of a student's special education services.

Given the importance of intensifying instruction and special education services to schools implementing tiered intervention frameworks, this paper presents information to clarify educators' understandings of these topics. First, the structure of tiered intervention frameworks is explained. Second, the concept of intensifying instruction is defined. Third, special education services are described, explaining their fit within a tiered intervention framework.

## History and Structure of Tiered Intervention Frameworks

Federal legislation is an impetus for a school's use of a tiered intervention framework. When the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was revised in 2004, it indicated how a tiered intervention framework could be used to identify students with a specific learning disability and provide early intervening services to young students demonstrating academic achievement deficits [5]. In fact, for the first time, the IDEA, which is the federal law that has the most direct impact on the provision of special education services to students with disabilities in grades Preschool-12, permitted the use of associated funds for students without a disability who needed early intervening services.

Subsequently, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) has addressed schools' uses of tiered intervention frameworks by acknowledging that a multi-tiered system of supports is an effective approach for attending to the instructional needs of students with disabilities and English language learners [6]. Furthermore, a review of websites of all 50 states revealed that each provided guidance or initiatives about tiered intervention frameworks. Thus, it appears this organizational scheme has become a generally accepted practice [7].

A tiered intervention framework is an organizational scheme configured to match a student's instructional needs with the school's system of interventions [8]. The interventions are arranged in categories referred to as tiers. Each tier is described in terms of its purpose and structure.

Tier 1 involves presenting high-quality instruction to all students to enable them to master core curriculum academic standards. High-quality instruction refers to using evidence-based practices to teach appropriate curriculum content [9]. Hence, general education teachers tasked to present Tier 1 instruction use many effective and efficient evidence-based instructional strategies while developing students' self-regulation skills [10].

Tier 2 is targeted supplemental instruction. Targeted means the instruction focuses on academic skills a student needs to master but has not, while supplemental means the student continues receiving Tier 1 instruction also. Intensifying instruction begins at Tier 2 and is discussed in detail below.

Tier 3 is intensive instruction. This means it is highly individualized instruction for meeting the instructional needs of students manifesting significant, persistent academic achievement deficits. For the vast majority of students, it, too, is supplemental instruction provided after Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction have proven to be relatively ineffective. In most instances, the special education services provided to students with disabilities are considered one type of Tier 3 instruction. However, some students' special education service needs are more aligned with either Tier 2 or Tier 1 instruction. This matter is addressed below.

The most common tiered intervention framework comprises three tiers graphically depicted as a triangle with Tier 1 as the base, Tier 2 atop it, and Tier 3 atop Tier 2. Hence, Tier 2 and Tier 3 are sometimes called higher-level tiers.

### Intensifying Instruction

Intensifying instruction involves adapting a student's current instruction by manipulating alterable variables. The intent is for the new instruction to be more individualized and effective/efficient than the previous instruction.

In a tiered intervention framework, intensifying instruction most often begins in Tier 2. The purpose is to craft an intervention that proves to be more effective than the student's Tier 1 instruction and rectifies the student's academic achievement

deficit so that the student can return to Tier 1 and perform on grade level without receiving supplemental instruction.

Two commonly recommended adaptations for intensifying instruction at the outset of Tier 2 are changing a student's dosage and group size. Dosage refers to the time a student receives instruction, and group size refers to the pupil-to-teacher ratio.

Instruction is intensified when a student's dosage increases. At Tier 2, one way this happens is when a student is provided 30 minutes of supplemental instruction three days per week. The supplemental instruction might consist of the same instruction provided in Tier 1 but for a more extended period, or it may be adapted instruction presented in addition to Tier 1 instruction.

When the teacher teaches fewer students, this reduction in the pupil-to-teacher ratio is an instructional intensification. Reducing the group size might reduce the number of distracting stimuli in the environment, enabling a student to attend to instruction better. More often, however, a lower pupil-to-teacher ratio allows the teacher to provide each student with more opportunities to respond, followed by immediate, behavior-specific feedback than has been the case in a larger group when Tier 1 instruction is presented [11].

How a school approaches Tier 2 instruction will dictate how much intensifying instruction is employed. Two approaches that predominate in the literature are using a standard program or following a problem-solving approach. In actual practice, most schools use both.

A Tier 2 standard program is best understood when contrasted with Tier 1 instruction. Fuchs et al. [12] commented that "... highly effective Tier 1 programs are designed using instructional principles derived from research, they are not typically validated by research" (p. 13). In other words, a Tier 1 program is established as teachers determine a proper curriculum and which instructional strategies are effective and efficient. In contrast, a Tier 2 standard program has been empirically validated altogether. The program specifies procedures to be followed, including the dosage, scripts for teachers, instructional materials, and the pupil-to-teacher ratio for a lesson. Often, this ratio results in a small group instructional arrangement [12]. Additionally, teachers may have to complete special training before using the program. Research studies (e.g., either experimental or quasi-experimental) demonstrate that the program is effective for the students for whom the program was developed [13].

With the problem-solving approach, a school-based team collaborates to design a Tier 2 program appropriate for each student. The team (a) identifies the problem and determines its cause, (b) develops a program to address the problem, (c) implements the program, and (d) evaluates the program's effectiveness [14]. The problem-solving approach allows more teacher collaboration and flexibility than a standard program. Yet, it does not necessarily result in a program validated by research.

Instead, data on the fidelity of implementation and progress monitoring must be collected. Hence, the problem-solving approach can be much more labor-intensive than a standard program.

Advantages associated with standard programs compared to a problem-solving approach include increased fidelity of implementation, evidence supporting its effectiveness, and improved student outcomes [15]. Disadvantages include the time and costs involved in developing Tier 2 programs, plus insufficient programs available to meet all students' instructional needs [16]. A problem-solving approach can address this void and result in a Tier 2 program more closely aligned with a student's specific academic needs, partly because the school-based team can choose from various intervention options. Yet, the unique programs developed necessitate training personnel who may not possess the skills and knowledge needed to implement the program [14]. Additionally, fidelity of implementation and progress monitoring data will need to be collected to establish that the program is supported by evidence, which could result in the program being a promising practice [17].

### Special Education

In the United States, a federal law, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), directs the provision of most school-based special education services. At its core, the definition of special education states that it is specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability. Specially designed instruction involves the content, methodology, and delivery of instruction. Content refers to a student's curriculum, which can include academic and functional content. Methodology refers to the instructional strategies a teacher employs to teach the content. The IDEA states that teachers should use evidence-based practices to the extent possible. Delivery of instruction includes the personnel involved in presenting instruction, the location where the student is taught, and when the special education services are provided [18].

A student's special education is collated in a written plan called an individualized education program (IEP). Individualized means the program provides services that address the needs that result from the student's disability. Individualization does not automatically mean the services will be provided via a one-to-one pupil-to-teacher ratio. However, this arrangement might be used when necessary for the student to demonstrate progress appropriate considering their circumstances.

An IEP must address a student's academic achievement and functional performance. Academic achievement refers to a student's performance in traditional subject matter areas, such as mathematics and English/language arts. Functional performance involves a host of matters that do not have an academic focus but may need to be addressed due to the nature of a student's disability and the fact that the student must receive instruction about the matters to realize the IDEA's purpose of preparing the student for

post-secondary education, employment, and independent living. Examples of functional curriculum content include performing activities of daily living, such as personal hygiene tasks, and engaging in proper social communication behaviors [18].

The development of an IEP mirrors the problem-solving approach described previously. Once established, the IEP is equivalent to a Tier 2 standard program in that a student's IEP serves as the basis for intensifying instruction [19]. At a minimum, an IEP is reviewed and revised annually. However, it can be reviewed and revised anytime there is a need to do so. The review and revision process involves intensifying instruction by adapting existing IEP services. Altogether, the intensification process highlights how special education consists of the microanalysis of teaching.

Most students provided with special education services will have received Tier 1 and Tier 2 services before receiving more intensive instruction resulting from an IEP. The resulting intensive instruction meets the definition for Tier 3 services in a school's tiered intervention framework. However, this does not mean that every student's special education is synonymous with Tier 3 services. Some students with disabilities may, due to receiving effective special education services, demonstrate a need for Tier 2 services. For the same reason, others may prove they are ready to return to Tier 1 and be dismissed from special education. Nonetheless, Shapiro (n.d.) [3] reported that 80%-90% of special education services equate to Tier 3 intensive instruction.

This circumstance has resulted in some asking why special education services need to be provided when seemingly appropriate Tier 3 services are available. The answer is that special education services come with legal protections under the IDEA and accommodations a student can use across their school program. Overall, special education services result in individualized instruction that is impossible through other means.

### Conclusion

The process of intensifying instruction and providing special education services share a similar focus: designing individualized instruction. For most students, intensifying instruction within a tiered intervention framework is intended to remediate their academic achievement deficits so they can return to Tier 1 and receive effective and efficient instruction that does not necessitate supplemental instruction. In a tiered intervention framework, supplemental instruction equates to an early intervening service intended to prevent a student from needing more costly special education services. Conversely, the individualized instruction provided through special education services enables a student to make progress appropriate considering their circumstances and realize the IDEA's purpose, which is to prepare students with disabilities for post-secondary education, employment, and independent living. In other words, the expressed purpose of special education is not fully remediating the academic achievement deficits exhibited by students with disabilities.

While this outcome would be welcomed, it is not an expectation for every student with a disability.

Most special education services are equivalent to the type of intensive instruction considered Tier 3 instruction in a tiered intervention framework. However, this is only sometimes the case, meaning Tier 3 is not synonymous with special education. This circumstance highlights how two separate mechanisms have been developed in the United States to provide educators with ways to match a school's system of interventions with each student's instructional needs.

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DOI: [10.19080/OAJELS.2024.02.555579](https://doi.org/10.19080/OAJELS.2024.02.555579)

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