A Proposed Tiered Model of Assessment in Writing Instruction: Supporting All Student-Writers

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Writing is an essential skill and outcome for academic and professional success, but the call for evidence-based practices and instructional differentiation to support all student-writers’ needs has yet to be sufficiently addressed. The Common Core State Standards’ Initiative resurfaced a focus on writing instruction and brought attention to reading and writing connections. Despite the efforts of policy, writing is still reported by teachers to be an instructional challenge. Further, even though there are models of Response to Intervention (RTI) for reading and mathematics, tiered support for writing instruction is not present in classrooms or it may not be systematic, sustainable, and replicable. The purpose of this paper is to suggest a model for tiered support in writing drawing from reading structures. Analogies are drawn between the two; limitations and research implications are discussed.

Keywords: Writing, writing instruction, tiers of writing support, assessment, screening, diagnosis, progress monitoring

INTRODUCTION

Writing as a literacy outcome is valued in business, academic, and social contexts. The National Commission on Writing (NCOW, 2004; 2005) reported findings from a nationwide survey indicating that human resource directors in both public and private sectors rated writing skills as a critical factor in hiring and ongoing promotion prospects for professional and administrative workers. Unfortunately, it is estimated that annually more than three billion dollars are spent on remediation of writing skills in the private sector (NCOW, 2004) and an additional quarter of a billion are spent in the public sector (NCOW, 2005).

Contrary to previous policy efforts, the 2010 Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI, 2010) emphasized writing instruction in its guidelines with a specific focus on writing across the curriculum for learners to understand content and demonstrate knowledge. Until then, writing was neglected from public policy (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, [IDEA], 2004),
and it had faded away from classroom instruction as reported in national surveys (e.g., Cutler & Graham, 2008; Gilbert & Graham, 2010). This neglect was evident by students’ performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; National Center for Education Statistics, [NCES], 2012; 2013) as few participants achieved proficiency in writing across the testing grades. Specifically, the 2011 NAEP assessment (NCES, 2012) showed that only 24% of both 8th and 12th graders scored at a proficient level and only 3% scored at an advanced level. Not surprisingly, this pattern of underperformance prevails at college entry with approximately one third of high school graduates being required to complete remedial classes as a result of their failure to meet minimum writing requirements necessary to attend entry-level composition courses (ACT, 2007).

Writing, though, should be highly valued in classroom settings to develop writers who are academically competent, citizens who are critical thinkers, and professionals who are successful in their careers. In classrooms, writing could serve both as a means for acquiring new and demonstrating attained knowledge; thus, it could be used as a learning device and as an evaluative outcome. With such broad applications, writing allows students to note connections within and across content area learning, grapple with newly attained knowledge toward deep understanding, and create new work that is a synthesis of information they acquired through reading. Writing in response to newly learned content increases both knowledge acquisition and information retention (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson, 2004; Graham & Hebert, 2010). Further, writing could aid teachers with instructional design as they reflect on students’ understandings and application of imparted knowledge.

According to the expectations set by the authors of the standards (CCSSI, 2010), student-writers should be able to write for clear purposes (to inform, persuade, and entertain), and should be able to navigate through the steps of the writing process to plan, draft, revise, and edit their work. Additionally, they are expected to engage with complex, content-rich text; acquire and use academic language; and procure confirmation from a variety of source texts to support thematic understandings presented in written products. They should also engage in a process of rhetorical task analysis (Philippakos, 2018) so that the development and organization of their written work relates to the task, audience, and writing purpose. Finally, students should develop skills and inquiry capabilities that would allow them to conduct research and engage in both brief and extended writing activities.

Even though the standards set outcome expectations, they do not address the methodologies and pedagogies to be used to support students in achieving those goals. It is also not clear whether changes in instructional practice have taken place as a result of these policy expectations (Philippakos, 2017b). Most
importantly, it is not clear how writing should address the needs of all learners and how to best differentiate instruction at the classroom level. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to (a) suggest a tiered model of support in writing by drawing on structures in place for reading instruction, and (b) further discuss both limitations and needs for future research. In the following section we first comment on the Response to Intervention (RTI) model for reading and on a suggested model for tiers of writing instruction for the elementary school. We caution the reader that this is a suggested model and further research is needed for its validation.

Response to Intervention: The Reading Experience

RTI, derived from the IDEA, was built in accordance with the division of labor continuum (Byrnes, 2005), and promoted differentiation by offering multiple levels of progressively more intensive instruction in response to student performance. In accord with the reauthorization of IDEA, Congress changed the criteria for the identification of students with Learning Disabilities (LD). Consequently, the traditional discrepancy model between achievement and intellectual ability (IQ-achievement) lost favor as the method for identifying students and for providing services.

Rightfully, the discrepancy model received a number of criticisms. First, it has been characterized as a “wait to fail” approach. A student might have struggled across multiple grades without receiving any additional support as s/he might not have qualified due to a lack of discrepancy between IQ and achievement. By the time the student qualified for support, valuable time had been lost making remediation a more challenging task (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). Second, identifying a student as having a LD might not have truly reflected the student’s cognitive ability and intellectual capability, but instead could have reflected poor or inadequate teaching (Kucan & Palinscar, 2011; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003; Velutino, Scanlon, & Small, 2006). Finally, the discrepancy model ignored students who were consistently low performers, but never qualified for intervention as they failed to meet the required differential for a discrepancy (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). These students were underserved and inappropriately supported within the school system as they simply managed to “get by.”

While at its genesis RTI was primarily a preventative model of instruction that attempted to reduce the need for the most intensive services, it also promoted early identification of students with LD. According to RTI, all students within a classroom receive high quality scientifically-based instruction, and assessment is used to support early identification and intervention. Tiered instruction does not rely on an IQ discrepancy model; therefore, RTI shifts attention to the general education classroom and accountability therein becomes a central aspect of tiered instruction. The consequence of this is that interventions first begin at the classroom level with the instructor providing differentiated,
evidence-based instruction and using assessments to guide instruction for the whole group (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

Thus, in Tier 1 instruction, students in the general education setting receive high quality research-based instruction (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Mellard, Byrd, Johnson, Tollefson, & Boesch, 2004). Students who are assessed and identified as performing at lower rates and who have not made adequate progress in the core program, are provided with targeted instruction in Tier 2. Tier 2 instruction may be inside or outside the general education classroom and is characterized by small flexible groupings of 3 to 6 students. Its main characteristic, though, is that it must be more targeted and explicit than Tier 1. If based on the results of ongoing progress monitoring, students do not attain adequate progress with Tier 2 instruction, they are offered Tier 3 instruction – a more intensive, individualized intervention provided to learners who continue to perform at lower rates, those not realizing the full benefits of the provided instruction. Tier 3 instruction usually requires additional testing and the support of special education services.

This multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) approach provides prevention and intervention by using ongoing assessment and instructional support that range in intensity and strive to support students with reading difficulties (Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2016). The National Center on Response to Intervention (2010a, b http://www.rti4success.org/) provides a clear explanation of the procedures used to assure that all students receive instruction aligned with their academic needs. Screening of all students is the first stage of the RTI model (Vaughn, 2003). Early universal screening allows for the identification of students in need. Progress monitoring is then used to assure that all students are progressing appropriately based on their grade and standard norms. Progress monitoring is used, also, to examine how effective an instructional intervention is for a specific student or group of students (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003). Students’ academic performance and progress is monitored using data that have the potential to inform instruction. Therefore, the entire process of RTI is data driven and the use of tiers of instruction strives to support students as learners, acknowledging their needs (Vaughn, Wanzek, & Fletcher, 2007; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2007; 2011). This multi-tiered model of instruction can accelerate student learning by providing instruction responsive to students’ demonstrated needs based on ongoing assessment data (Heck, 2009); this differentiation is the core of RTI.

Concerns have been raised regarding the effectiveness of RTI on improving students’ reading performance overall and on providing students the needed tools to achieve their full potential instead of falling behind (Balu et al., 2015). A report that evaluated the MTSS model for elementary students across 13 states found unfavorable results for first graders who were identified as in-
need of differentiated support and presumably received it. This was surprising as the role of RTI is to indeed support its learners. Fuchs and Fuchs (2017), in a response to the findings, challenged the design and selection process. Most importantly, though, they stressed the importance of differentiated instruction and the importance of considering simpler models that could serve schools at the organizational level as well as students’ needs.

**Tiered Writing Support**

Writing instruction is consistently found lacking in the nation’s schools, so much so that the NCOW (2003) was compelled to release a report entitled “The neglected R: The need for a writing revolution,” which called on teachers and school districts to place a more intense focus on the instruction of writing. The writing practice guide released by What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), which was established by the Institute of Educational Sciences (2002), has called for a minimum of one hour of writing instruction daily (Graham, Bolinger, et al., 2012). In a national survey conducted with third and fourth grade teachers, Brindle and colleagues (2016) found that teachers reported spending an average of only 15 minutes daily on writing instruction, a finding consistent with previous studies of upper elementary students (Gilbert & Graham, 2010), but less than half the time reported by early elementary teachers (Cutler & Graham, 2008; Graham, Harris, Fink-Chorzempa, & MacArthur, 2003). This issue is further exacerbated by the reported lack of PD in the area of writing instruction (Gilbert & Graham, 2010; Kennedy, 2018; McCarthy & Geoghegan, 2016; Philippakos & Moore, 2017; Troia & Graham, 2016) which hinders teachers’ proficiency to carry out the often demanding and complex evidence-based practices (EBPs) effectively (Cook & Odom, 2013; Klingner, Ahwee, & Pilonieta, 2003; McCarthy & Geoghegan, 2016). The sum of these challenges is compromised fidelity and overall implementation when EBPs are scaled up (Groskreutz & Higbee, 2011).

While reading instruction has benefitted from the introduction of RTI and the focus on tailored support for students not meeting progress objectives, in writing there is not such a model of instruction (Troia, 2015). This lack of differentiation may be due to the general paucity of writing instruction occurring in schools or to limitations of the assessment measures that could provide valid information for screening, diagnosis, and progress monitoring. Both instructional and assessment limitations are situated in the challenging context of the complex nature of writing that utilizes cognitive and metacognitive skills and processes that may be unique to a writer. The timing for feedback on writing is also something that makes assessment challenging. Feedback alone is demanding on the assessor (teacher) and challenging to apply for the assessed (student-writer). Even though teacher feedback had been thought not to be as effective (Hillocks, 1986), a recent review on writing evaluation found positive effects
of feedback both from teachers and from students (Graham, Hebert, & Harris, 2015). Feedback, though can be time consuming (for a review see MacArthur, 2016) though advances are being made in using technology to support teachers in efficiently simulating individualized writing conferences (McKeown, FitzPatrick, & Potter, 2018; McKeown, Kimball, & Ledford, 2015). Even though several assessments exist, they have constraints in their application and usage (see Troia, 2015 for a review). Instructional differentiation must address students’ needs and valid assessments must identify students for intensive writing support early. Thus, it may be useful to consider assessments that would support such differentiation. We provide a basic framework for this work, which we identify for its limitations and for a need to be further investigated for it to be considered valid. The process/model we suggest follows the process shown in Figure 1 and is explained in the next section. Herein, we do not comment on instructional recommendations within each tier of instruction as this would be beyond the scope of this paper.

**Figure 1. Suggested process of assessment for tiered instruction**

*Assessment*

Much like the assessment process implemented with regard to reading instruction, we propose an assessment cycle that screens all students at the beginning, middle, and end of the year and new students upon entry. Screening measures are used to identify students progressing as anticipated, those in need of further support, as well as serve as a gauge of the overall effectiveness of school or grade-level instruction. Progress monitoring measures can be used monthly to evaluate students who are presently meeting objectives at the anticipated rate and more often for students who are receiving more focused intervention at Tier
2. Following a minimum of two evidence-based interventions, if students in Tier 2 are not progressing at the anticipated rate, they may be referred for further diagnostic assessments to support teachers in customizing an individualized education plan for that student’s writing instruction. Following here, the full details of the assessment cycle are outlined.

**Screening Measures.** Screening measures are meant to be brief and quick in their application in order to identify students who may be at risk. Automated Essay Scoring (AES) measures can be easy to administer as they can be completed on a computer and scored, as the word implies, automatically (McNamara, Graesser, McCarthy, & Cai, 2014). AES usually addresses development, organization, style, grammar, usage, mechanics, and overall quality (Kellogg, Whiteford, & Quinlan, 2010). Though AES has received criticism in terms of validity (MacArthur, 2016), it does show promise (Deane, 2013), and additional research is underway examining the affordances of AES as screeners (Wilson, 2018; Wilson, Olinghouse, McCoach, Santangelo, & Andrada, 2016).

A school or a district could administer a screening measure for writing scored by AES at the beginning of the year to determine whether students perform as expected for their grade-level placement and for the grade level standards’ expectations.

Further, at the start of the year, the school-level team and grade-level team may administer a writing measure or a reading and writing measure (perhaps one that involves summarizing and responding for older students or use of a given source to develop and support a claim) or request the completion of responses to several writing topics that address different genres and reflect the purposes included in the grade-level standards. Students’ written products could be analyzed based on quality rubrics affording teachers the opportunity to practice evaluation in grade-level groups to assure agreement and common criteria (some form of interrater reliability) at the start of the year. That is, an alternative measure could be used to validate findings by AES with the potential added benefit of increasing teacher buy-in related to both the process and the AES instrument. This approach could also support communication among and across grade-level teams on expected writing and literacy milestones. As a process, it can help all teachers, independent of their years of experience and expertise, to develop common goals for students and promote the use of a common language.

Two such examples of rubrics are holistic and analytic rubrics. Holistic rubrics provide a single score on written performance considering and analytic rubrics examine writing across several dimensions/criteria and include a rating for each criterion (e.g., organization, development, word choice, sentence structure, and tone or style (Diederich, 1974). Growth in students’ writing scores measured with holistic quality rubrics is generally indicative of more cohesive, well-sequenced, and comprehensive written products. Holistic rubrics are used
to quantify the overall writing performance, not favoring any one area (e.g., organization, grammar) more than others. In the research literature, holistic scoring is the most common way of scoring writing (Graham & Perin, 2007a; 2007b). Holistic rubrics can be easy for teachers to use and allow them to score a number of papers. One drawback to holistic scoring is that it is not particularly responsive to small changes in student performance that might indicate growth in response to instruction (e.g., Graham et al., 2015; McKeown, et al., 2016). Further, holistic rubrics do not provide targeted feedback to students and can be challenging for them to interpret their scores and set goals for improvement (Graham et al., 2015). Therefore, we suggest that such rubrics are used with caution and with the purpose of further examining and confirming the findings of AES while they support the presence of a common language among teachers.

For students who perform below benchmarks on these universal screening measures, focused intervention employing EBPs in smaller groups could be implemented for Tier 2 instructional support. For students who perform according to grade level-expectations on the screening measures, teachers may create differentiated support for enrichment purposes within their Tier 1 settings.

**Diagnostic measures.** For students who did not meet grade-level expectations on the screening assessment, use of a diagnostic measure could support identification of the causes of the student’s difficulty. By providing writing prompts across genres featured in the standards and using genre-based rubrics to grade student writing, teachers may identify the specific genre needs at both group and individual levels to later use in instructional planning (e.g., for informational – appropriately aligning supporting details with main points; for narrative – targeting the use of dialogue or the inclusion of adjectives). For instance, if a group of students lacks knowledge on the use and representation of dialogue, their classroom teacher may address this need in a small group. Papers could then be graded by classroom teachers using genre-specific evaluation criteria (Philippakos, 2017a; Philippakos & MacArthur, 2016a; Philippakos & MacArthur, 2016b; see Figure 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name_______________________________</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0 - Not there</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 - So-So</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 - Amazing!</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Beginning:**

**Topic:** What is the topic and why should the reader care about it?

**Opinion:** Is the writer’s opinion clear?
| Middle | **Reason 1**: Is the 1\textsuperscript{st} reason connected to the opinion and is it clear and convincing to the reader? |
|        | **Evidence**: Is there enough evidence to support the reason? Is the evidence explained? |
|        | **Reason 2**: Is the 2\textsuperscript{nd} reason connected to the opinion and is it clear and convincing to the reader? |
|        | **Evidence**: Is there enough evidence to support the reason? Is the evidence explained? |
|        | **Reason 3**: Is the 3\textsuperscript{rd} reason connected to the opinion and is it clear and convincing to the reader? |
|        | **Evidence**: Is there enough evidence to support the reason? Is the evidence explained? |
| End    | **Restate Opinion**: Did the writer restate the opinion? |
|        | **Think**: Did the writer leave the reader with a message to think about the topic? |
| Other? | Is there a title that clearly refers to the information of the paper? |
|        | Is the paper’s tone appropriate for the audience? Was the writer respectful to the reader? |
|        | Are there clear and appropriate transition words used throughout the paper? |

**REVIEWER/WRITER AS A READER**
- Was the paper convincing overall? Why?
- What revisions should be made?

**GOALS**
- What should be the writer’s current and future goals?


*Figure 2. Sample Persuasive Rubric for Evaluation*
Standardized measures could be administered for students who do not achieve the anticipated results following at least two implementations of EBPs at a small group level. For example, the Test of Written Language (TOWL-4; Hammill, & Larsen, 2009) or the Test of Early Written Language (TEWL; Hresko, Herron, Peak, & Hicks, 2012) could be used. The ability of these tests to provide differential entry points and provide information on skills and writing competence can help instructors and faculty as a team make informed decisions on students’ needs. Further, the tests’ affordance for the story-writing tasks to be completed in larger formats than on-on-one conditions allow for timely assessments and comparisons.

Also, students’ portfolios as they are carried over within the school system could be used to support teachers’ identification of potential challenges for students who are in the same school. Even though the primary usage of portfolios would be for student self-reflection and goal setting (Boerum, 2000), teachers through horizontal and vertical reviews and meetings can reflect on students’ performance and engage students in such a reflection process. Those portfolios could provide a sample of students’ work from the previous year and could be used by a teacher to better understand the writing profile of a student who is entering his grade. Portfolios are not considered to function as screening measures since they do not account for summer loss; further, portfolios have raised concerns on validity of given scores (Herman, Gearhart & Baker, 1993; Nystrand, Cohen & Dowling, 1993). However, a teacher could use them to identify a student’s strengths and weaknesses and even compare students’ performance in a specific type of genre from the end of the previous year to the start of the new academic year.

In addition, the use of journals at the beginning of the year could provide valuable information regarding a student’s strengths and weaknesses. Journals encourage students to provide in a narrative their experiences with writing and their overall attitude and feelings toward it. Students could engage in self-evaluation and goalsetting, both practices found to enhance writing performance, to further explain what strengths they see in their writing, what weaknesses, and define their overall goals. For example, they may be asked to share in response to a prompt such as, “Describe a time you were proud about your writing,” or “Draw a picture to describe how you feel about writing and explain your picture” (Philippakos & MacArthur, in press). For younger writers this process may involve the use of dictation especially for Kindergarten students who have yet not “broken the code” and learned the alphabetic principle. Orthography and phonology are usually the primary foci of early elementary students in their reading acquisition. However, it is important that these foundational skills are addressed in addition to meaningful writing as they can affect later written
production. Ideation and organization can be negatively impacted by the demands on the cognitive load presented by a student’s inability to identify sounds in words, connect them with letters, form the letters, and appropriately space words at a fluent rate (Abbott & Berninger, 1993; Graham, Berninger, Abbott, Abbott, & Whitaker, 1997).

Based on the recommendations from Fuchs & Fuchs (2017) for models of tiered support that reflect the needs of diverse settings, we consider and propose a two-tiered model for writing instruction. In this model, all students will receive high-quality, evidenced-based writing instruction at the classroom level with the inclusion of small-group instruction to address process and task-related challenges. Based on assessment results, students identified as having challenges with writing performance will receive a second tier of differentiated instruction using evidence-based methodologies to support them in developing competence in foundational skills, genres, and application of cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

**Progress Monitoring.** As explained in the previous section, the use of genre-specific writing measures could be used as a progress monitor. In order to make this suggestion clearer to readers, we draw from work with elementary schools (Philippakos & MacArthur, 2017). In collaboration with a district and its schools, several genres were identified –story writing, persuasion, report, and compare-contrast for Grades 3 to 5; story writing, procedural, responses to reading, opinion writing, and report for Grades K to 2 (Philippakos, under review; Philippakos & MacArthur, under review; Traga Philippakos, MacArthur, & Munsell, in press; Traga Philippakos, Munsell, & Robinson, 2018; Traga Philippakos, Overly, Ritchies, Grace, & Jones, in press; Traga Philippakos, Robinson & Munsell, in press). Three writing prompts that represented three different genres were administered at the beginning of the year and across the year in a repeated measures format. A genre-specific rubric was used to evaluate the papers, and teachers identified students in need of specific lessons for the genre that would be taught. Carefully, assessments were conducted after the introduction to the genre to assure that students’ performance (or lack thereof) was not due to confusion or misunderstanding about the genre or lack of background knowledge. This model allowed the identification and remediation of specific instructional needs as well as the ongoing monitoring of students’ performance across the academic year (See Figure 3).
Further, Curriculum Based Measures for writing (CBM-W; McMaster & Espin, 2007) are quick to administer (within 3 to 5 minutes) and provide information on total words written (TWW), words correctly spelled (WCS), and correct word sequences (CWS). Teachers could administer CBM-W to examine students’ progress toward specific goals that relate to spelling and sentence construction. For instance, McMaster and colleagues (2017) found that both CWS and CWS minus incorrect word sequences were sensitive to students’ growth in writing performance in a relatively short period of time, three to five weeks, which would allow teachers to adjust their instruction to be responsive to student performance. In terms of technical adequacy, CBM-W have been found to have acceptable alternate forms reliability as well as criterion-related correlation coefficients between the CBM-W and a state-level standardized assessment at Grade 8 and below (Weissenburger & Espin, 2005). Again, Weissenburger and Espin (2005) found CWS minus incorrect word sequence to be the strongest predictor of performance and CWS as second strongest.

This section concludes the proposed model for assessment. In the next section, we address factors that can strengthen an assessment-based system at the school level. Primarily we stress the importance of Professional Develop-
ment (PD) on writing, which is necessary for sustainable instructional quality. We acknowledge that additional research is needed for the evaluation of effective models of PD on writing (Kennedy, 2018; McCarthey & Geoghegan, 2016).

Implications for Effective Application: Factors to Consider

RTI is dependent on several factors, which include the professional development (PD) of teachers, engagement of administrators, support of district-level personnel, adequate time allotted to teachers for understanding the purposes and components of RTI, willingness of staff to redefine their roles to support the initiative, and, finally, the origin of decisions, which should derive from the practitioners “at the grassroots level” (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007, p. 131). Similarly, Barnes and Harlacher (2008) identified five principles which underlie RTI. The principles include: 1) an approach to education that works in a proactive and preventative manner, 2) the creation of an instructional match between skills, curriculum, and instruction, 3) an orientation based on problem solving and data-driven decision-making, 4) use of effective practices, and, finally, 5) application of RTI at a school level as a system and not to individuals or isolated classrooms.

Even though these principles may be used to guide the application of RTI, there are several additional considerations regarding the design of RTI initiatives and their formats (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). First, lessons learned from previous reform efforts suggest that teachers, as an implementation force of policy initiatives, do not always respond positively to policy demands and suggestions. In a review of research studies that examined teachers’ responsiveness to policy decisions, Coburn, Pearson, and Woulfin (2011) reported that teachers often do not apply policies that refer to reading instruction. Teachers’ dissent about instructional policies could be based on their previous beliefs, knowledge, and practices; ambiguity of policies could also lead to confusion (Coburn et al., 2011; Tabak, 2006). Desimone (2009; 2011), Guskey and Huberman (1995), McKeown, FitzPatrick, and Sandmel (2014) and several other colleagues suggest professional development focus on strengthening instructor-level content knowledge and also including informed leadership in strengthening teacher buy-in (Tallerico, 2014). Additionally, Desimone (2009; 2011) suggests that for comprehensive school reform to be successful, it needs to be effective and implemented uniformly without changes that lack a rational grounding.

School settings are multi-dimensional and many factors, dynamics, and principles should be considered, such as teachers, administrators, and instructional approaches. Hughes and Dexter (2008) identified factors that supported the implementation of RTI programs to include administrative support, PD, teacher buy-in, collaboration, and allocation of time for collaboration. In high performing schools, literacy tends to be the focus of all school members with a strong collaboration between teachers, administration, and parents (Taylor,
Pearson, Clark & Walpole, 2000). In the study by Taylor and colleagues (2000), change and student-support were the goals of all individuals working with students, and their close collaboration led to an increase of literacy performance. Further, PD was ongoing, and successful schools had established a collaborative system within their structure to take advantage of knowledgeable others within their school community. This study suggests that school related factors should be considered when implementing a new initiative. These school related factors refer to an examination of ways to support administrators in becoming instructional leaders instead of school managers, ways to promote effective collaboration among school members, and ways to provide ongoing professional development as relates to school implementation practices.

**Professional development.** PD is essential in developing an understanding among participants of the implications of an initiative and the specifics of its implementation (Hughes & Dexter, 2008; Taylor, Raphael, & Au, 2011). This should be especially considered with writing PD since teachers report not receiving sufficient PD on writing instruction (Philippakos & Moore, 2017; Troia & Graham, 2016). On-site PD, which addresses instructional implications, can support teachers’ instructional effectiveness and self-efficacy (Kennedy, 2018; Kennedy & Shiel, 2010). Third, for the RTI initiative to be effective, the use of data to determine the framework of differentiation is important; however, considerations should be made when examining the effectiveness of interventions regarding their quality and duration.

Research on successful schools and reform efforts provides guidelines regarding the level of organization within a school that promotes student learning and teacher commitment. PD can be considered the common ground of successful schools (Taylor et al., 2000). Taylor and colleagues (2005) asserted that when teachers are provided with PD, they provide high-quality instruction aligned to the policy. The purpose of the study was to examine variables that accounted for students’ academic growth (Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2005). The authors included a total of 13 schools across two years of study and examined 92 teachers and 733 students from Grades 2 to 5. The students were assessed in fluency, comprehension, and writing. Teachers were interviewed three times per year and were also observed. The results indicated that PD which was supported by study groups, collaboration among participants, sharing of effective practices, and coaching, led teachers to change their practices. This model is consistent with both theoretical and empirical foundations of PD.

Collective participation leverages the communal skills while lessening the isolation so common in educational settings (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Brownell, Adams, & Sindelar, 2006; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Desimone, 2011; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002). Collective
participation is one of several dispositions considered pillars of quality PD. Others include inquiry, reflection, professional judgment, critique, and creation of a safe environment for risk-taking (Ball & Cohen, 1999).

Another area of focus in preparing teachers to effectively implement MTSS of writing instruction is differentiation. By situating the learning in the real setting of the teacher’s classroom and allowing participants to reflect on the knowledge, skills and characteristics of their students, facilitators have an opportunity to actively problem solve in creating opportunities for implementing the plan (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Brownell et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Hochberg, 2010; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002; Schumm, Vaughn & Haager, 1994; Schumm et al., 1995; Smith & Desimone, 2003). Considering that teacher buy-in is a driver of implementation, highlighting opportunities for differentiation in order to meet the needs of the students currently in the classrooms maximizes the value of the training for the teachers thereby increasing buy-in. PD leaders may fully capitalize on instructional capacity by focusing on practices that serve diverse learners most appropriately (Hochberg, 2010; Schumm et al., 1994). High-quality PD should always be derivative from contextualized work with students (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Smith & Desimone, 2003).

Teacher learning outcomes are increased when PD is content-specific, so in this case, related to writing and specifically connected to genre knowledge (e.g., structure, academic vocabulary, key characteristics; Ball & Cohen, 1999; Ball & Forzani, 2009; Birman et al., 2000; Desimone, 2009; 2011; Smith & Desimone, 2003). Foci should be the gaps between current instruction and the demands of the curriculum (Hochberg, 2010). It is the responsibility of PD implementers to invest in content knowledge that may need to be addressed (McKeown, et al., 2014) as teachers rating themselves higher in content knowledge and self-efficacy also report increased use of EBP (Brindle et al., 2016).

Explicit modeling is as important during PD as it is during the teachers’ instructional implementation with students as it supports teachers in acquiring the new content and pedagogical knowledge in the context that it will be applied (Ball & Forzani, 2009). Explicit modeling meets the threshold of active learning as it engages participants in active instruction, observation, and offering critical feedback – all with the aim of advancing the skills of teacher participants (Ball & Forzani, 2009; Birman et al., 2000; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Desimone, 2009; 2011). As teachers become increasingly comfortable with an intervention, they are more likely to properly differentiate for all learners (Graham & Harris, 1993; Schumm et al., 1994; 1995); explicit modeling during PD allows an opportunity for teachers to become more comfortable with sophisticated interventions prior to offering instruction in front of a class of learners where it matters most.
Another characteristic of effective PD that would be necessary to successfully implement this model of writing instruction is the creation of a culture of evidence within school settings (Cochran-Smith & the Boston College Evidence team, 2009). Klingner (2016) offered that the creation of a culture of evidence be considered the foundational centerpiece of effective PD. Fostering an environment of objectivity, with specific regard to choosing the instructional strategies paired to students’ academic needs, supports effective decision making.

The study conducted by Taylor and colleagues (2005) examined whether the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA) framework had an impact on students’ growth (Taylor et al., 2005). The CIERA school change project included a framework to support school-wide reform efforts as schools worked toward change on reading outcomes. The results suggested that the inclusion of more instructional elements from the framework led to higher achievement. However, change in instructional practices and schools happened across two years of study, not in a short period of time. This may also have implications when considering RTI as a school-wide change effort and the effects of the application of multi-tiered instruction. RTI may require time to show its effects, and change across sites may take a long time.

Time is a factor that should be considered in any systemic change. Time for instruction, time for teachers’ planning, and time projected for future change. We argue that systemic change requires projected planning. Thus, PD and efforts to establish a system of differentiation or a system of data-driven instruction require the development of micro and macrogoals with projected and expected changes. This process can support accountability and also examine feasibility of efforts and scale-up procedures before they collapse.

Change that will be sustainable and significant will require a system’s change in which all school partners and colleagues coordinate efforts. By partners and colleagues, we refer to administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and even volunteers, who engage with children and apply instructional approaches. Thus, administration and teachers need to collaboratively review data and set goals for instruction and for students’ achievement. Paraprofessionals, who from our experience, tend to be excluded from faculty meetings or grade level Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) need to be present in order to have a clear understanding on the ways that their instruction and implementation helps move the needle on a child’s learning goals. Common goals and a common understanding on the use of data support the development of a common language and the implementation of a model that serves students’ needs instead of a model that is in place for policy compliance. In this process, university-school partnerships can further support implementation of EBP (Holmes Group, 1990; Zeichner, Payne & Brayko, 2015). Such partnerships when planned and
are long-term, with attention to feasibility, and sustainability (Traga Philippakos, Overly, Riches, Grace & Jones, in press) can support and promote change on teachers’ pedagogy and lead significant changes in students’ performance. Philippakos and colleagues (under review) engaged in a long-term partnership with a school district using systematic assessment procedures and instruction of writing (Philippakos, MacArthur & Coker, 2015). Through a planned scale-up process, significant changes in students’ writing performance emerged (Philippakos & MacArthur, 2017) and as reported by district officials, teachers began to request PD on writing instead of those being planned by the district. However, in this process, efforts were coordinated between the researcher, district, principals, teachers, parents, and students. And the process took time and careful long-term planning.

Limitations

In this paper we present a model for tiered-writing support drawing guidelines and information from the work on multi-tiered support that have been conducted in reading. In this process we commented on caveats and on challenges that should be addressed and considered prior to engaging in such a process. We acknowledge that the model we suggest needs to be examined and investigated in the field. Further, instructional approaches for each of the model’s sections should be carefully considered. Thus, we suggest that research methods to examine the effects of the model in iterative cycles with ongoing revisions be considered (Reinking & Bradley, 2008). Design research is emerging in the field and has been recognized for its value in educational practices (e.g., Collins, 1999; Howell, Philippakos, Voggt & Undegraft, 2018; Ivey & Broaddus, 2007; Reinking & Bradley, 2008; Reinking & Pickle, 1993; Snow, 2015). Further, design research is a necessity for the identification of EBP that would and should guide instruction across tiers. No assessment and tiered model can lead to success for student-writers and their teachers unless instruction is systematic, and based on evidence; thus, results are replicable.

Final Thoughts and Future Directions

Writing is a neglected aspect of literacy (NCOW, 2003) but a crucial one for students’ academic and professional success. It is unfortunate that in the midst of attention focused on fluent reading and decoding, policies have neglected to consider that writing promotes critical thinking and that the process of reading to evaluate, synthesize, and summarize information support comprehension (Graham & Hebert, 2010).

Unfortunately, research on writing interventions is still developing, too. As Graham, McKeown, and colleagues (2012) reported, the quality of research in the area of writing intervention is both weak and lacking. In their meta-analysis, only 36% of the studies were true experiments, only 29% reported
acceptable treatment fidelity, and only 37% controlled for teacher effects (Graham, McKeown, et al., 2012). In a meta-analysis specifically addressing writing interventions for students with LD, Gillespie and Graham (2014) noted similar concerns about the quality of the research as only 44% of the studies were true experiments, few studies reported treatment fidelity, controlled for teacher effects, or featured more than one instructor in the intervention.

Change is not an easy process. At the initial steps of RTI in reading, concerns were stated on the factors that would lead to its success. After 14 years, it is evident that for an initiative to be successful, organizational change should be in place, as well as attention to individual change (Taylor et al., 2011). Mastropieri & Scruggs (2005) had pointed out that for RTI to be successfully implemented within a school setting, the roles of teachers and diagnosticians would need to change. Also, the role of para-professionals would have to be more clearly defined—and their training addressed—if they were to play a role in the implementation of instruction (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). Efficacy studies were to be conducted (Gersten & Dimino, 2006). RTI has been shown to be supportive of student outcomes (Burns, Appleton, & Stehouwer, 2005). Efforts for tiered support should be made in writing (Troia, 2015) and a consideration of the implementation challenges that have occurred in tiered reading instruction might be taken into account as RTI for writing is applied. The development of support teams within school settings and in collaboration with universities could be a way to support instructors with fidelity of implementation (Berkeley, Bender, Gregg, & Saunders, 2009). Hollenbeck (2007) concluded that a “review of literature reveals there is currently more unknown than known about the construct” (p. 144). There is more to learn about writing instruction than we currently know and research is needed on interventions, assessments, and on scale-up processes that can evaluate programs long-term.

References


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