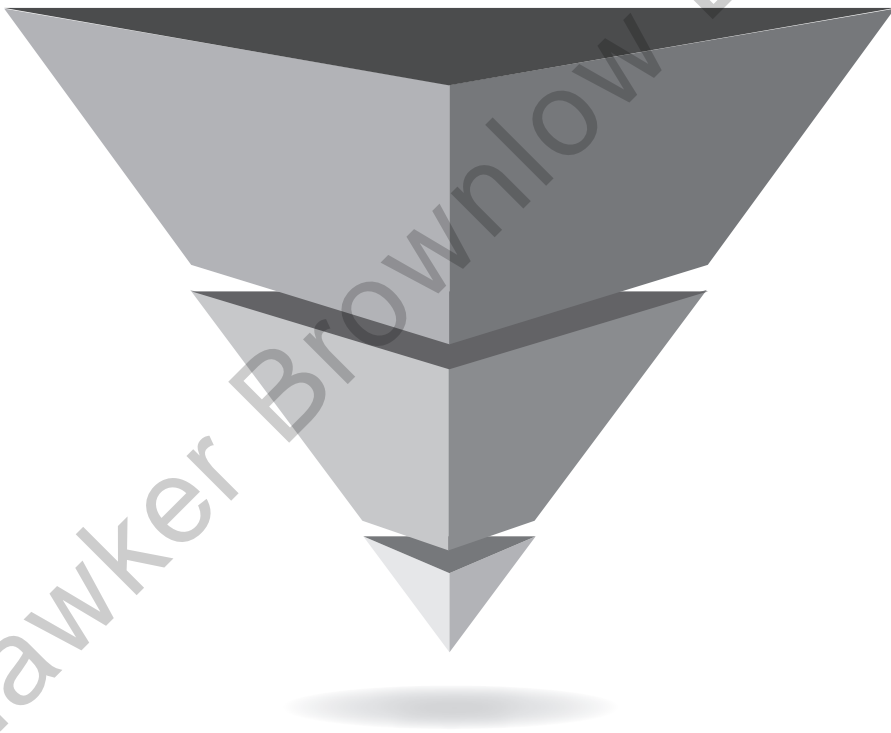


# Uniting *Academic and Behavior* Interventions

SOLVING THE SKILL OR WILL DILEMMA



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# The Chicken *and* the Egg

**W**hich came first: the chicken or the egg? This question has been debated for centuries. Aristotle claimed the chicken must have come first “for there could not have been a first egg to give a beginning to birds, or there should have been a first bird which gave a beginning to eggs; for a bird comes from an egg” (Fénelon, 1825, p. 202). Charles Darwin argued the opposite, that the egg must have come first, assuming the question intended *egg* to mean an egg in general, rather than an egg that hatches into a chicken (“Chicken or the Egg,” n.d.). The question remains equally provocative today, with some of our most respected scientific minds, like Stephen Hawking, offering insights into the debate. (If you’re wondering, Hawking is an egg supporter [The Bridge School, 2005].)

Far from trivial, this question represents a much deeper discourse about the origins of life and how we view the universe. As Roman philosopher Macrobius stated:

You jest about what you suppose to be a triviality, in asking whether the hen came first from an egg or the egg from a hen, but the point should be regarded as one of importance, one worthy of discussion, and careful discussion at that. (Smith & Daniel, 2000, p. 169)

Within the educational universe, we face our own chicken-or-egg dilemma regarding students who are at risk. We know that some students struggle in school for academic reasons—that is, they lack essential skills and knowledge needed to succeed in core curriculum. For other students, their struggles are due to an inability to consistently demonstrate the behaviors and motivation necessary for academic success. Our students most at risk usually demonstrate both problems, as there is a strong connection between low academic skills and problem behavior (Fleming, Harachi, Cortes, Abbott, & Catalano, 2004; Morrison, Anthony, Storino, & Dillon, 2001; Nelson, Benner, Lane, & Smith, 2004). To successfully intervene when students

demonstrate academic and behavioral difficulties, we must answer our chicken-or-egg question: Is a student's behavior creating the academic struggles, or are the academic struggles prompting the negative behaviors?

Call it the skill-or-will dilemma. This vexing question is hardly a triviality and certainly demands careful discussion. Successful interventions require educators to address the cause of the student's difficulties, not just the symptoms, and focusing on the skill-or-will question forces us to pinpoint the origin of a particular student's struggles. Answer the question correctly, and educators can greatly increase a student's chances of succeeding in school and beyond, but answer the question incorrectly, and the consequences for the student can be catastrophic.

## **The Life-Changing Impact of Success or Failure in School**

Just as answering the chicken-or-egg dilemma forces one to consider a larger view of the entire universe, so the skill-or-will dilemma requires educators to reflect on the very purpose of K–12 education. Peel back the layers of federal, state, provincial, and local requirements placed on schools today, and the fundamental purpose of our work is quite simple: schools are here to prepare children to be adults. As educators, it is our job to ensure our students learn the essential academic skills, knowledge, and dispositions needed to succeed in their adult life. Achieving this goal not only serves children, but also secures our collective future prosperity.

So if schools exist to prepare students to be adults, then we, as educators, must have an accurate vision of the future for which we are preparing our students. Undeniably, the world our students will compete in is not the world most current educators were preparing for when progressing through the K–12 system. Our world has changed radically and permanently, driven primarily by technological advances that are transforming how we work, communicate, think, and live. Let us consider the defining characteristics of this new world and what will be required of students hoping to succeed in it.

## **Higher Levels of Education and Training**

To make a living above the rate of poverty, our students are going to have to continue to learn after high school. In 2012, about one-third of jobs were in occupations that typically require postsecondary education for entry (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). By 2020, there will be fifty-five million new job openings in the United States. Twenty-three million will be for jobs that don't currently exist, and 65 percent of all jobs will require some level of postsecondary education and training (Gunderson,

2013). Occupations that typically require a master's degree for entry are projected to grow the fastest from 2012 to 2022, followed by associate's degree and doctoral or professional degree occupations (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). And among traditional blue-collar trades, higher levels of academic preparation will be a prerequisite for employment. For example, the ACT (2006) examined math and reading skills required for electricians, construction workers, upholsterers, and plumbers and concluded they match what's necessary to do well in first-year college courses.

Additionally, wages for careers that require higher levels of education and training will outpace nondegreed jobs, with the average college graduate earning 77 percent more than the typical high school graduate (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013).

In 2011, males and females aged twenty-five to thirty-four with a bachelor's degree earned 69 and 70 percent more, respectively, than those without one (Weiner, 2013). According to Harvard University economists Claudia Goldin and Lawrence Katz (2007), from 1980 to 2005, the college wage premium—the amount of additional money earned by those with a college degree—increased by “an astonishing 25 percent.” The rate of return for each year of college education now stands at about 13 to 14 percent (Goldin & Katz, 2007). This trend will continue a growing “education gap,” in which access to a middle-class or better lifestyle will require post-high school learning (Mortenson, 2007).

As Craig D. Jerald (2009) states in *Defining a 21st Century Education*:

The demand for educated workers will continue to be high, and those who obtain postsecondary education or training can continue to expect to earn a premium while those who do not will have far fewer opportunities to earn a living wage. (p. 30)

## Lifelong Learning

In the 21st century workplace, our students will not have a job or a career, but jobs and careers. This means that earning a postsecondary degree or certificate does not mark the end of one's learning, but is merely a prerequisite to join a profession. According to the RAND study *The 21st Century at Work: Forces Shaping the Future Workforce and Workplace in the United States* (Karoly & Panis, 2004):

Rapid technological change and increased international competition place the spotlight on the skills and preparation of the workforce, particularly the ability to adapt to changing technologies and shifting product demand. Shifts in the nature of business organizations and the growing importance of knowledge-based work also favor strong non-routine cognitive skills, such as abstract reasoning, problem solving, communication, and collaboration. Within this context, education and training become a continuous

process throughout the life course involving training and retraining that continues well past initial entry into the labor market. . . . We can expect a shift away from more permanent, lifetime jobs toward less permanent, even nonstandard employment relationships (e.g., self-employment) and work arrangements (e.g., distance work). (p. xiv)

As James O'Toole and Edward Lawler (2006) state in *The New American Workplace*:

The increasing speed of technology change, the increasing sophistication of foreign competitors, the export of manufacturing jobs, downsizing due to pressure to increase productivity amount to an almost perfect storm, creating an ever-increasing need for workers to update their skills regularly and, often, to develop entirely new ones. (p. 127)

For our students, learning must be a never-ending process.

## Individual Responsibility and Collaboration

Due to an ever-increasing competitive global economy, successful businesses have moved from a costly, hierarchical leadership structure characterized by layers of management to a more “flattened” organizational structure in which employees work in teams that take a project from concept to completion. Due to this flattening out of the organizational structure, employees will be expected to take much greater responsibility for managing and taking responsibility for their work (Jerald, 2009).

Although employees will be required to take greater personal responsibility, this does not mean they will be working in isolation. Quite the contrary—the result of a flattened work structure is a greater reliance on project-based teams to achieve organization goals. And due to advances in technology and social media, the concept of a team is not limited to proximity or locale. As Thomas Friedman writes in his book *The World Is Flat* (2005), “Suddenly more people from more different places could collaborate with more other people on more different kinds of work and share more different kinds of knowledge than ever before” (p. 194).

If the new global economy is defined by jobs that require higher levels of prerequisite education and ongoing training and workers who have the ability to work independently and cooperatively, then what must all students learn during their K–12 education to be properly prepared for these demands? Certainly, our students will need to learn more than the three *Rs* or merely possess the ability to score proficient on current high-stakes, standardized end-of-year assessments. Instead, every student must become a true lifelong learner, possessing the skills and knowledge needed to continue to learn beyond high school. Additionally, every student must master the behaviors necessary to be self-responsible and to collaborate effectively with others.

Specifically, we can categorize these outcomes into three types of essential learning: academic skills and knowledge, academic behaviors, and social behaviors.

## Academic Skills and Knowledge

Academic skills and knowledge are composed of the foundational skills, content knowledge, and higher-level thinking skills students need to be able to apply what they have learned. *Foundational skills* include:

- Reading, including phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension
- Mathematics, including rounding, ordering, and comparing numbers; time and money; adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing numbers; fractions and decimals; rates, ratios, and proportions; algebraic expressions and equations; measurement and geometry; and statistics and probability
- Writing, including ideas, organization, and conventions
- English language, including functionally based oral and written expression

These foundational skills are essential to a student's ability to gain essential content knowledge and continue learning.

*Content knowledge* includes relevant information, concepts, and background pertaining to the various domains of the arts and sciences. As Jerald (2009) states:

Subject matter knowledge and basic skills are important building blocks for the broader competencies gaining value in the 21st century. . . . Being able to think critically about a topic or solve a problem in a particular domain demands sufficient background knowledge about it. And an important aspect of creativity is making connections across domains of knowledge—something that is impossible unless someone knows enough in different domains to make such a connection. (p. 31)

The term *higher-level thinking*, including analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, was made popular in education in the 1950s with the publication of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Kratwohl, 1956). It is essential that students master these critical-thinking skills to be able to apply what they have learned to future situations, problems, and environments, as well as to adapt and create new ideas and connections. Examples of advanced thinking skills that have high leverage for students include David Conley's (2007) standards for success.

1. Analytical reading and discussion
2. Persuasive writing



Utilizing collaborative teacher teams, a school leadership team, and a school intervention team, the RTI at Work pyramid is a visual representation of how a school can create both—taking collective responsibility for student learning and also delineating specifically who should take the lead responsibility for interventions relating to both skill (grade-level core content and foundational skills) and will (motivation, attendance, and behavior). We will describe the four *Cs* and the RTI at Work pyramid in much greater detail in subsequent chapters.

Our purpose in writing *Simplifying Response to Intervention* (Buffum et al., 2012) was to provide an extremely clear vision of how the professionals within the building should work together to ensure all students learn. As such, the perspective of the book is focused on the work of the *adults* in the building. In this book, we want to follow the same process but change the vantage point: What would a unified system of academic and behavior supports look like for *individual students* who require help with both skill and will? In other words, what would academic and behavior interventions look like for students who face the skill-or-will dilemma?

## Our Journey

In this book, we introduce you to five students: Armando, Katie, Holly, Franklin, and Anna.



While these students are fictitious, their attributes and needs are based on actual students we have served. These five students are designed to represent the spectrum of needs that are prevalent in schools across our nation, including:

- Different ages—Elementary, middle school, and high school aged
- Different demographics—Affluent and poor, English learners, and native English speakers
- Different settings—Large school and small school, rural and urban
- Different needs—Mild difficulties in skill and will to profound needs in both areas

Using the structure of the four *Cs* and the RTI at Work pyramid, we will look specifically at potential academic and behavior supports for each student, as well as

describe the collective processes the educators in the building would use to make these critical determinations. We then introduce an integrated “pro-solve” process to successfully determine, target, and monitor academic and behavior interventions, and we look at how schools can provide skill-and-will supports to each student within Tier 1 core instruction. We then discuss how schools can use Tier 2 supplemental interventions to support each student. Next, we demonstrate how to use Tier 3 intensive interventions when students have severe needs in academics and behavior. In the final chapter of the book, we identify ways in which schools can get started on this critical work. We will also suggest the steps that schools can take to continuously improve.

By the end of the book, our hope is that we, as educators, come to see students needing academic and behavior interventions not as a “dilemma,” but instead as an opportunity for discovery. In place of our traditional reactive intervention practices that focus more on labeling struggling students as either skill *or* will problems, schools can create a tiered, proactive process that sees the whole child—the chicken *and* the egg—and can collectively and seamlessly provide whatever support each student needs to learn at high levels.