

The only source of knowledge is experience.

—Albert Einstein

This book is written for practitioners by practitioners. As authors, we represent three different generations of public school educators—a Baby Boomer, a Gen-Xer and a Millennial—with over 75 years of combined experience in working with children and their parents. Each of us has implemented professional learning communities in our schools and districts. Each of us believes deeply in the power of collaboration and the goal of continuous improvement, and we’ve struggled to find increasingly better answers to the question, “How do we respond when students don’t learn?” Woven throughout this book are stories of real schools that have also been seeking better answers. Narrative case studies that open each chapter show how various responses play out at the school, classroom and individual student levels. We believe that educators should always consider our actions’ impact upon individual students, not just upon the average scores that comprise a school’s collective adequate yearly progress. As practitioners in our own schools and districts, the three of us have witnessed firsthand the power of timely, systematic interventions on student learning. This book explores two closely

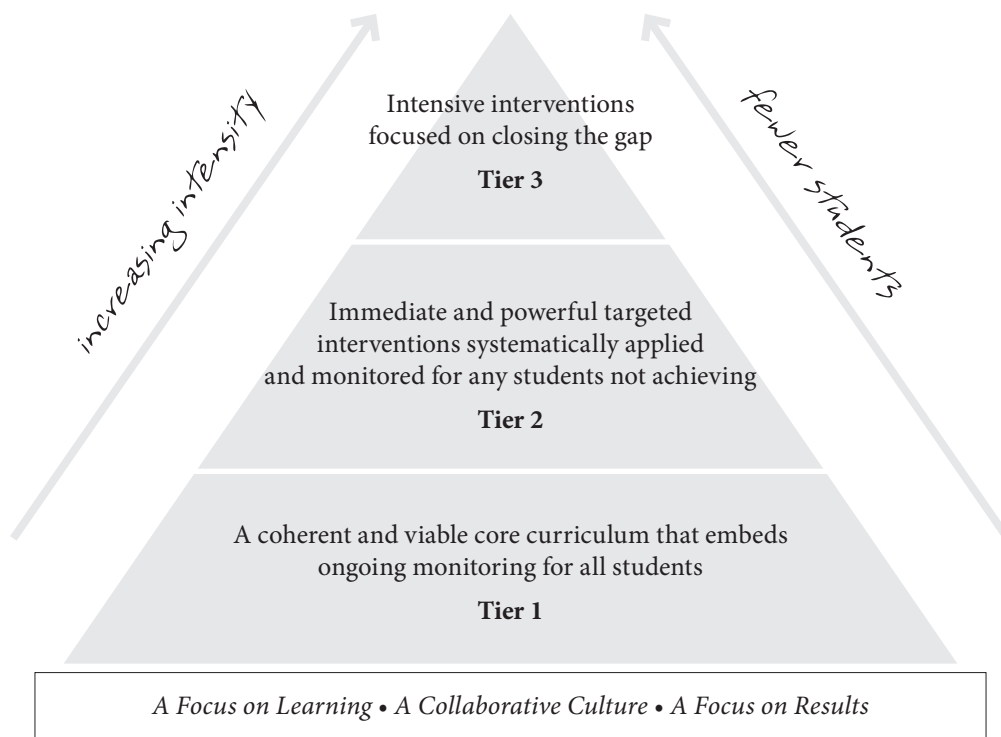


Figure 1-2: The pyramid response to intervention model

Thus, pyramid response to intervention combines the regulatory requirements of response to intervention with the time-proven effectiveness of the pyramid of interventions. PRTI uses the well-established power of the professional learning community model to drive the structural and procedural practices of response to intervention.

The Right Work at the Right Time

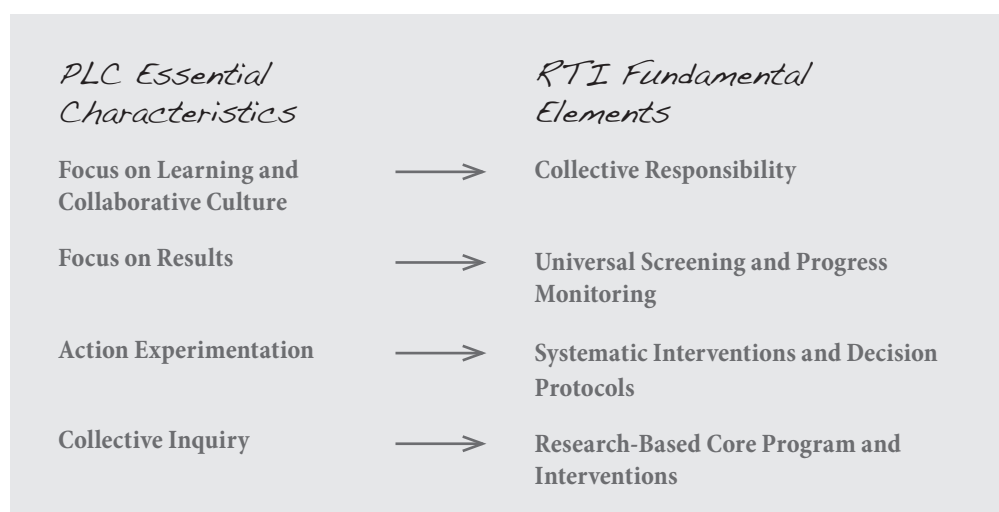
We believe that education is on the precipice of dramatic positive change. PRTI does not merely address learning outcomes for special education students; it integrates “special education” and “regular education” into simply “education”. PRTI brings together all staff to improve learning by delivering effective instruction and interventions to all students, without first waiting for them to fail. Adopting PRTI is about using best professional practice and insisting that we do what is best, necessary and right for all students—the right work at the right time.

We wish to reassure schools that already have begun their PLC journey that implementing PRTI will *not* be just another “new thing”. With a few caveats (such as the need for scientific, research-based interventions; universal screening; and progress monitoring), PRTI involves the same work as answering the PLC question, “How will we respond when kids don’t learn?” For those practitioners who have not yet begun the PLC journey, we will make the case that the most promising and research-supported way to implement response to intervention is to operate as a professional learning community.

Finally, because PLCs focus on results, they strive for continuous improvement through action experimentation: “Members of a professional learning community are action-oriented: They move quickly to turn aspirations into action and visions into reality” (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 4). All collaborative learning, planning and goal-setting are useless until put into action. Unless staff members are willing to try new things, improvement in student learning is impossible. PLC educators do not view experimentation as a singular task to be accomplished; rather, they embrace experimentation as “how we do things” every day. Human nature tends to view change as an uncomfortable process, but in a PLC, the team should feel uneasy *without* change, for without change, there is no opportunity for improvement. Action experimentation is perfectly aligned with response to intervention; the central concept behind RTI, after all, is to apply research-based interventions for a struggling student, then measure the “learning” response to the intervention.

Additionally, this action orientation provides adult learning opportunities, as there is no better way to learn than by doing. Roland Barth says, “Ultimately there are two kinds of schools: learning enriched schools and learning impoverished schools. I have yet to see a school where the learning curves . . . of the adults were steep upward and those of the students were not. Teachers and students go hand and hand as learners . . . or they don’t go at all” (2001, p. 23). When making critical decisions about teaching and learning, PLC teams engage in *collective inquiry* to continually learn about best practices. Teams do not make decisions merely by sharing experiences or averaging opinions, but instead by building shared knowledge through learning together. This collaborative learning enables team members to develop new skills to better meet the learning needs of their students. By building shared knowledge of best instructional practices, each team is now prepared to best meet the RTI requirements of implementing quality interventions with fidelity and efficacy.

When comparing the essential characteristics of being a PLC and the fundamental elements of RTI, one can see that these two powerful processes are not merely similar, but perfectly aligned to support the same outcomes.



Use Programs With Fidelity

Using adopted programs with *fidelity*—the way they were designed to be used—accomplishes two things: First, it prevents gaps within and between curricular components. By following the scope and sequence designed by the curriculum’s researchers and writers, students have the best opportunity to master the standards addressed. Second, fidelity helps educators evaluate the efficacy of adopted programs in improving student learning; if you have not implemented the program as intended, you cannot accurately evaluate its results.

Maximising instructional time requires staff to examine each lesson and all classwork and to ask the following questions:

- Are students actively engaged in work related to prioritised power standards?
- What is the best way to ensure students achieve mastery?
- Are we using the most efficient way of helping students to learn?

Tier 1 in Primary Schools

Student learning is the critical yardstick by which a school’s success is measured. However, in too many schools, teaching is not explicit and purposeful, and thus student learning is incidental. Often, only those students with the prerequisite skills and family supports for learning thrive, while under-represented students who lack such skills and supports fall through the cracks. In these schools, classroom time and teacher support are constants while learning is a variable.

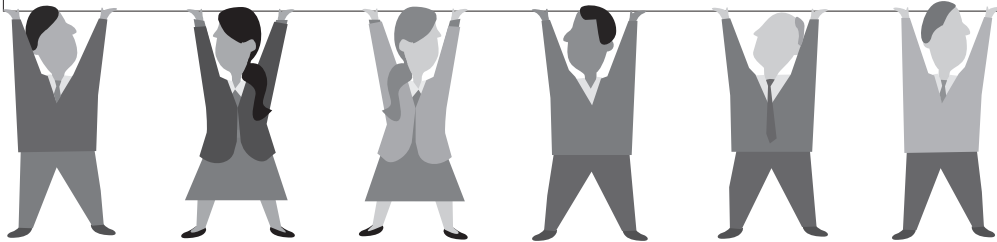
At one particular primary school all ethnic subgroups of students perform at very high levels. This diverse school has helped students—nearly half of whom are economically poor—beat the odds by upgrading its core program. The school provides a solid academic program early in prep and year one, and offers all children who need it a thorough review of the core program within the instructional day. In so doing, this school has improved the performance of its prep and year one students by nearly 50% over two years.

By narrowly concentrating on the core content in writing, reading and mathematics, students attained mastery of foundational concepts while keeping critical thinking as the primary goal. This school also focuses its resources by insisting that the curriculum used in the core program be designed to enhance student learning. Finally, the school sets high expectations for students and celebrates when educators and students achieve excellence.

Another primary school focuses on strengthening the core, resulting in multiple state awards for a school in which 78% of students are from low income backgrounds. Teachers focus on reading, writing and mathematics, subjects that take up 80–85% of the instructional time each day. The staff ensure coverage of all aspects of a balanced literacy curriculum;

Chapter Ten

Meeting Legal Requirements



The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

—George Bernard Shaw

Jeremy, a year three student, has struggled for the past two years. A student study team (SST) met with his mum last year, when Jeremy was in year two, but no follow-up meeting has yet occurred.

For the first four months of year three, Jeremy made little progress. He was encouraged to attend after-school tutoring sessions, but baseball practice often prevented him from doing so. His teacher, Mrs Campbell, requested that Jeremy sit at the front of the room and reduced his homework load, but to no avail. The school’s administrative team discussed whether special education, or at least formal evaluation, might be a good idea for him. But then, as the school developed a PRTI, the student study team (SST) became “gung ho” about behaving like a professional learning community.

So for the next five months, an instructor pulled Jeremy out of Mrs Campbell’s class in the afternoons to receive assistance with fluency and comprehension; the team began with those two areas based on Jeremy’s low percentile on the standardised reading test. The program used appeared to work well, although the research base on it was inadequate.