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Integration of Social, Behavioral, and Academic Approaches and Processes: Part One

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Many schools are working towards improving their overall social and behavioral climate. This endeavor is undertaken for its own sake, and in the anticipation it will improve academic performance for students. School climate has been related to a lack of connection and commitment on the part of students towards the school, discipline problems, and dropping out (Zins & Elias, 2007). There appear to be at least three predominant schoolwide initiatives to

frame improving school climate: Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS), Response to Intervention (RtI), and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).

As evaluators and supporters of schools and districts implementing academic and climate reform, we have had the opportunity to see all three approaches at work. All share similar immediate and long-term outcomes, but perhaps with a somewhat different order of anticipated change. Each can have its own set of developed measures of fidelity, in some cases with great overlap. Unfortunately, unless schools can find ways to integrate these approaches, the requirements for assessment and action planning associated individually with each approach may discourage buy-in due to the complexity of processes.

***Overview of this article.*** This is a two-part article, with the second part appearing in the next issue of *Communiqué*. Part 1 will discuss the connections between various processes used in SEL, PBIS, and RTI, and compare the similarities and unique components of tools used for fidelity measurement and action planning. Part 2 will provide an example to describe the overlap among the three approaches and provide some possible ways to connect them through aligned processes and the usage of a combination of approaches to maximize the support to students.

### **Comparison of Processes Within SEL, PBIS, and RTI**

SEL has been defined as “a process for helping children and even adults develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness. SEL teaches the skills we all need to handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work, effectively and ethically” (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), 2007, p. 1). PBIS has been defined as, “a framework or approach comprised of intervention practices and organizational systems for establishing the social culture, learning and teaching environment, and individual behavior supports needed to achieve academic and social success for all students” (Sugai et al., 2010, p. 13). RtI “is the

practice of providing high quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals and applying student response data to important educational decisions” (Kurns & Tilly, 2008, p. 1).

***Commonalities.*** All three approaches support the adoption of an evidence-based core instructional program. For each approach there are requirements for *systems* (e.g., teams, resources), *practices* (e.g., interventions), and *data* (e.g., outcomes for program development and measuring impact). Additionally, addressing buy-in prior to implementation is a key element for all three approaches (Bohanon et al., 2006; Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003; Kurns & Tilly, 2008; Hall, accessed 2011).

***Comparison of processes: Systems.*** There are several commonalities at the core of the systems that support PBIS, RtI, and SEL practices. Each approach has several common systems requirements, which include: obtaining high levels of administrative commitment (e.g., providing resources, presence at team meetings), coaching (i.e., external, internal), establishing representative teams with defined roles and distributed leadership (e.g., chairs, action groups), auditing current practices and outcomes (e.g., self-assessment tools, reviewing outcome data), and establishing priorities for change (e.g., connection with school improvement plan; Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003; Kurns & Tilly, 2008; Sugai et al., 2010). The literature on all three approaches supports the need to use evidence-based practices (e.g., problem solving, functional behavioral assessment) and contextually based standardized approaches (e.g., First Steps to Success, Walker et al., 2009; Check-in/Check-out, Crone, Hawken, & Horner, 2010). These approaches, including SEL, support a continuum of interventions as student needs become more intense (Fox, 2009; Greenberg et al., 2003).

*Comparison of processes: Practices.* The SEL perspective discourages the use of programs that are narrow, de-contextualized, guided by poor time management and allocations of resources, and lack understanding of the characteristics of the adults who must implement the change (Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003). Further there are strong recommendations from the SEL literature to prepare professionals for the school reform approach being applied (Elias et al., 2003). These suggestions are certainly related to the professional development for staff included in both RtI (Kurns & Tilly, 2008) and PBIS (Sugai et al., 2010).

Core messages from all three practices are that engaging instructional strategies should be utilized (Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, & Sugai, 2008; Walberg, Zins, & Weissberg, 2004), effective instruction is critical (e.g., models instructional tasks; Kurns & Tilly, 2008), and students should be taught components of self-regulation (e.g., goals setting, self-evaluation). This focus on instruction may provide a critical link among all three approaches.

From an SEL perspective, programs that systemically teach cognitive, affective, and behavior skills improve self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, and relationship skills (CASEL, 2003). Outcomes associated with SEL programs have included improvements in social and emotional skills, attitude towards self and others, positive social behaviors, reduction of conduct problems, emotional distress, and academic performance (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). From an RtI perspective, self-regulated learning strategies (Sawyer, Graham, & Harris, 1992) can be taught to all students to help them become more successful in the core curriculum. However, these strategies may not always be a part of the core curriculum itself. Strategies such as goal setting (e.g., identifying aim lines or targets for schoolwide improvement in performance) from a PBIS perspective are typically associated with more intensive group (e.g., classwide self-management) or individual

self-determination skills that are incorporated into person-centered planning (e.g., futures planning).

Another point of interaction across all three approaches relates to connections with standards and the specificity of strategies taught. Both SEL and RtI support aligning instruction related to core skills (e.g., reading, respect) with standards for learning respectively (CASEL, 2003; Kurns & Tilly, 2008). PBIS provides a school-based contextualized process for teaching locally defined behavioral norms directly, unique to each setting (e.g., safety, responsibility). However, one study suggests there is more commonality across PBIS programs for behavioral expectations (e.g., be respectful, be responsible) across schools than not (Lynass, Tsai, Richman, & Cheney, 2012).

Each of the three approaches asks broadly similar yet specifically unique questions regarding the core curriculum. From an SEL perspective, there appears to be very specific skill sets that should be addressed to teach individuals to effectively and ethically handle themselves, relationships, and work (CASEL, 2007). Specifically, skills to be taught can include self-regulation, self-monitoring, and social skills (Norris, 2003). The SEL approach supports infusing these skills within the core curriculum. Infusion of SEL into core academic instruction can include the integration of goal setting into academic study habits, including literature that addresses conflict resolution, and utilizing effective instructional arrangements to increase academic gains (Zins & Elias, 2007). For PBIS, teams are asked to identify core behavioral norms and develop curriculum (e.g., matrices, lesson plans) to explicitly teach and acknowledge behaviors. From an RtI perspective, the components for the effective teaching of reading are identified clearly (e.g., teaching phonemic awareness, effective phonics instruction) along with

features of effective instruction (e.g., explicit, meaningful interactions with language) (Kurns & Tilly, 2008).

In summary, PBIS adds a behavioral core curriculum when one may not exist, RtI logic asks how effective the core curriculum is in meeting student needs and whether instructional practices are based on a science of teaching, and SEL infuses self-determination related strategies within the core curriculum itself.

*Comparison of processes: Outcome data.* Commonalities and differences can be found across the use of outcome data for each of the three approaches. In terms of a logic model, each has possible proximal (short-term) and distal (long-term) outcomes. From an SEL perspective, changes in attitudes (e.g., motivation, responsibility, attachment) and behaviors (e.g., engagement, attendance, study habits) might be considered proximal outcomes and some changes in performance more distal (e.g., grades, subject mastery, test performance, drop out, discipline). Data from PBIS could include proximal outcomes such as office disciplinary referrals (ODRs) and distal outcomes such as improved standardized test scores. The RtI approach may consider proximal outcomes such as changes in curriculum-based measures (CBM) and distal outcomes associated with improved measures of discipline.

The interaction among student academic, social, and behavior performance has been explored under each approach. There are data that suggest that academic achievement may have some influence on social competence, and vice versa (Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O'Neil, 2001). Further, schools that addressed PBIS with fidelity have observed both academic (i.e., test scores) and behavioral improvements (ODRs; Bradshaw & Mitchell, Leaf, 2010; Horner et al., 2009; Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006). Additionally, higher levels of school bonding and improved social and emotional decision making skills have been related to higher test scores and grades

(Fleming et al., 2005). Some researchers have raised concern that a true causal relationship between social behavior and academic performance has not been established (Algozzine, Wang, and Violette, 2011). It may be that specific strategies (e.g., teaching phonemic awareness) must be selected to address specific goals (e.g., improved reading fluency). However, goal setting alone does not automatically lead schools to select and implement interventions strategies to address needs. One administrator for example explained that a priority goal of his school was to, “increase our reading score[s] by 10% and our attendance by 95%,” but did not identify the changes to instruction (academic, social, or behavioral) that would be required to meet this goal (Kahne, Spote, de la Torre, & Easton, 2008, p. 298). While each strategy can address problems when utilized as a single process, solutions may need to be selected to address the desired outcome (e.g., academic, behavioral, social).

### **Comparison of Fidelity and Action Planning Tools**

Each of the three approaches has specific tools used for measuring fidelity and action planning. Schools that implement approaches (e.g., PBIS) as designed have been more likely to experience successful outcomes (Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010). Also, schools need self-assessment tools of fidelity for consensus building (Kurns & Tilly, 2008). For SEL, CASEL Implementation Rubric can be used to guide the SEL process and measure fidelity. A measure that is completed by team members for action planning for PBIS can include the Team Implementation Checklist (TIC; Sugai et al., 2010). For RtI, an instrument that has been adopted by some states is the Self-Assessment of Problem Solving Implementation (SAPSI; Florida Problem Solving/Response to Intervention Project). These tools include the components of systems, practices, and data discussed above.



*Sample tools.* For example, the CASEL Rubric includes items sequenced across four major implementation components including readiness (e.g., administrative support, team development), planning (e.g., self-assessment of needs, goal settings, action planning, selecting evidence-based practices), implementation (e.g., professional development, applications of interventions schoolwide, applications of interventions at the classroom level), and sustainability (e.g., ongoing professional development, evaluation of programs, communication, policies, community and family collaboration). The TIC includes 22 questions that address issues of establishing commitments for implementation, creating and maintaining teams, conducting self-assessment of the PBIS process, developing schoolwide support (e.g., schoolwide expectations, classroom systems), formalizing data collection systems, and developing support for individualized interventions (Sugai, 2010). The SAPSI includes 22 questions related to RtI implementation. The tool is structured to include constructs such as infrastructure development (e.g., data collection, team structure), implementation of RtI across three tiers and problem solving, and monitoring and action planning (Florida Problem Solving/Response to Intervention Project).

All three instruments can be completed by teams as self-assessments for action planning purposes. The areas with the greatest commonality again are found within the items related to systems supports. For example step one and two of the CASEL Implementation Rubric asks if the principal has committed to the SEL process and has established a steering committee to guide the process. Question number one of the TIC for PBIS asks if the administrator is active on the behavior support team. Questions three and four of the SAPSI (v2.4) ask if the principal is actively involved in leadership team meetings for RtI. All three tools require teams to reflect on the connection of the approach (e.g., SEL) with existing school improvement goals, the

establishment of teams, the status of current levels of support, and the development of action plans. Each instrument requires teams to consider systems supports and methods for evaluating outcomes prior to adopting practices.

**Cautions.** Unfortunately, when schools adopt all three approaches at once, they could be required to complete three separate tools and have three separate teams with three separate action plans. Larger schools may be able to operate such divergent structures. However, these schools would run the risk of having separate, competing programs, while trying to improve the overall climate of their buildings. This lack of efficiency could jeopardize the collective strength of their approaches, and at a minimum, increase the chance that staff will not be willing to complete one more tool.

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