
Preface

Old wine in new skins. In many ways, this text is an apt reflection of this metaphor: For years, the tenets of applied behavioral analysis and behavioral consultation have informed the services that many of us, as school psychologists, have attempted to provide to children, teachers, and parents. Dissatisfied with the limitations of the special education gate-keeping role, school psychologists have expanded our understanding and applications of assessment beyond the mission of diagnosing and categorizing disorders. With the advent of the response to intervention (RTI) framework for our services, we find—perhaps for the first time—a vehicle that is sufficiently flexible and practical to accommodate these tenets in schools, uniting general and special education in a common effort to address the needs of all learners. The challenge has been to navigate the “research to practice gap”—that is, to translate foundational principles and methods to everyday work in schools.

In the RTI model, assessment serves multiple purposes: First, it reveals the impact of instruction and behavior management practices on all students at what has been termed *Tier 1*. Is the reading curriculum effective in teaching basic and advanced skills? Are students progressing at a rate that will be adequate to attain long-term performance goals? Are students developing social competence, and are they being prepared to successfully meet the demands of adult life? The second purpose of assessment in RTI is to identify students whose level of performance and rate of growth are inadequate: Who is failing, or at risk of failure, in attaining established goals? This is accomplished through the analysis of universal screening and strategic monitoring at Tier 1 and progress-monitoring data gathered for students receiving intervention at Tiers 2 and 3, using assessment methods that directly sample behaviors that are research-based indicators of overall functioning.

The third purpose of assessment is to examine students’ skills and the learning environment to pinpoint needs and deficiencies: What is the reason for this student’s performance problem, and how can it be addressed? It is this third purpose of assessment that forms the core of a case study

that is the subject of this text. As we proceed upward through the three tiers of the RTI model, assessment becomes more sharply focused not only on qualitative aspects of students' academic and behavioral performance but also on modifiable environmental factors that are functionally (or causally) related to performance problems. Thus, assessment might demonstrate that a student's lack of motivation or practice contributes to lack of fluency in reading, leading to interventions using incentives and frequent opportunities for reading practice. Similarly, a finding that the materials used for instruction are poorly matched to the student's current skill level would point to the need for changes in instructional materials.

These purposes of assessment are easily understood as both desirable and appropriate in the contemporary practice of school psychology. However, for a variety of reasons, many practitioners lack the knowledge and skills that would enable them to apply methods well suited to these purposes. This text is intended to provide practical guidance to such practitioners. It is not a foundational text in applied behavior analysis, or even in behavioral consultation (which serves as the basis for our model of the case study), and readers interested in more basic instruction in those models are encouraged to consult sources such as Alberto and Troutman (1982) and Bergan and Kratochwill (1990). However, school psychologists who are familiar with basic principles, but lacking in a practical understanding of their applications in practice, will find support in the material contained in this text.

Readers who prefer to develop their understanding of a concept by moving from part to whole can read this text sequentially, beginning with Chapter 1 and moving through to the end. However, we planned the text by consulting the case study rubric, using it as a guide to generate the content of each chapter. Readers who prefer to start with a holistic understanding of a concept, and then investigate its detailed subset of components, may benefit from first reading the case study rubric and the two case studies presented in Chapter 10. This approach will allow the reader to link the technical material explored in each chapter to the concrete examples already presented in Chapter 10. However the reader chooses to approach the text, it is our hope that it will serve as a comprehensive yet practical guide for students and practitioners alike.

In the first chapter, the context in which RTI has evolved as well as challenges to early implementation efforts are discussed. Explanations of the manner in which the RTI process addresses these challenges are provided. In Chapter 2, the reader is given a brief tour of Tiers 1 and 2 and shown how activities and findings at these tiers serve as a precursor to the Tier 3 case study. Assessment methods that are appropriate for use in the RTI (and case study) process are discussed in detail. The role of the school psychologist as a problem-solving consultant and systems change agent is described in Chapter 3.

Chapters 4 through 8 provide a rationale and detailed procedures for conducting the case study at Tier 3. Although chapters treat stages of the case study process discretely, readers are encouraged to view the stages as a holistic approach to assessing and intervening with students at risk for school failure. The problem identification stage described in Chapter 4 uses data gathered at Tiers 1 and 2 to clarify and confirm the severity of student performance problems. It also gathers and synthesizes data leading to hypotheses about the cause of the problem. In Chapter 5, the procedure for hypothesis testing is explained as the key to determining the reason—and an empirically sound solution—for the problem. Chapter 6 describes various single-case designs that can be used for hypothesis testing and monitoring the progress of students receiving interventions. Chapter 7 highlights the practical aspects of selecting and implementing interventions, with emphasis on intervention integrity as a key aspect of a successful case study. A detailed explanation of methods for evaluating case study outcomes is provided in Chapter 8, along with guidelines for deciding whether outcomes are successful.

The final two chapters of the book address implementation issues. Chapter 9 offers a perspective of special education eligibility determination using the RTI process, with a focus on the nature and outcomes of interventions, as well as the integrity of planning and intervention implementation. Chapter 10 proposes two techniques that can be used for evaluation of case study implementation and outcomes by practitioners or in university training programs. The first technique uses aggregated data across case studies to detect patterns revealing the impact of school psychologists on the students that they serve; the second incorporates a case study evaluation rubric, illustrated with examples of completed case studies.