

## What's in a Name?

In the following *Nomanis* editorial, the terms *Response to Intervention* and *Multi-tiered System of Support* are discussed in relation to the three levels of instructional support in mainstream educational environments. It was published in the January 2024 issue of *Nomanis* and is reproduced here with the permission of the editors, Dr RobynWheldall and Professor KevinWheldall, directors of MultiLit Pty Ltd and members of the InSpEd Expert Panel.

### Rtl or MTSS?

There has been a lot of talk on the socials lately about the usage of the terms Rtl (Response to Intervention) and MTSS (Multi-Tiered Systems of Support). At MultiLit, we have been pioneers in Australia of the use and application of the former term for about twenty years. We have reservations about the unnecessary use of a new term (MTSS) for something that is already well-established and we believe that there is a danger of messages becoming mixed which can lead to confusion. Some experts in our field (both in Australia and overseas) say that they use the terms interchangeably, others stick with Rtl, while others argue that MTSS is the next generation, much improved model that we should adopt.

But what if we are wrong? Aren't all tiered systems of support trying to achieve the same thing? What if we are simply out of date, as some may have it. Let's look at the arguments.

First, it is sometimes said that Rtl is limited and restricted in comparison to the broader, more all-encompassing term MTSS. There is often commentary about the fact that Rtl deals with academic matters but not behaviour; hence the need to elaborate a more expansive model. But from the outset, Rtl included student behaviour and student academic performance – and so it should because the two are inextricably linked. For students to learn they must have a set of learning behaviours – attending to the instruction being the most basic. The argument that Rtl does not include classroom behaviour is quite simply incorrect.

Secondly, we hear that Rtl is only concerned with instruction at Tiers 2 and 3, that is, the intervention or intensified instruction that is occurring in addition to whole class, universal instruction. Again this is incorrect. Rtl has always been predicated on effective and exemplary instruction at the Tier 1 level. This is a core part of the conceptualisation; the foundation on which all other learning must build. The argument that MTSS is concerned with Tier 1 instruction, whereas Rtl is not, is a false claim.

Third, there is commentary about how Rtl is not fit for purpose these days because it emanated from the field of special education and therefore is not relevant (or desirable) to a more contemporary inclusive view of education. There are problems with this idea. We need to interrogate these. Rtl arose out of a need to change the way that students in the United States were identified to receive educational support services. The practice of using the discrepancy model – the gap between a child's IQ score and their measured academic performance – to determine access to special education services was inherently inequitable. Only those students who had an IQ assessment, which could often be very expensive to obtain, could be considered for intervention. So poor kids were more likely to miss out on the services that they needed. Moreover, the idea that a gap must be present to indicate a learning disability relegated those kids who did not score so highly on an IQ test to be considered ineligible. This is also discriminatory as kids who are not so cognitively talented should not be overlooked in terms of accessing the services that they need to reach their potential. This is particularly the case when we consider being literate is a basic human right.

The development of the response to intervention framework meant that all students in schools can have the opportunity to access additional services if they do not respond to the instruction provided at the universal or Tier 1 level. This is a far more equitable approach than was previously the case. It is also in line with a non-categorical approach to education whereby we are not overly concerned with diagnoses or labels to identify who needs more assistance. This is not to say that we are not cognisant of the differing characteristics of learners but rather that we are committed to providing whatever instruction it is that any individual child may need, irrespective of a diagnosis or label. In this way, we might argue that a non-categorical approach is the foundation of a truly inclusive education system.

In some quarters there is a clear and manifest disdain for special education. Anything that derives from special education theory and practice is seen as bad and as anti-inclusion. This is a concerning element of some of the debate as there is a wealth of good practice that has had its origins in special education. Some of the very practices that enable a more inclusive and successful educational experience for students derive directly from this field.

It seems rather counter-intuitive, then, to deride and dismiss a model that was a positive response to some of the inequities that existed prior to its conceptualisation. Some advocates for the need for the distinction between RtI and MTSS refer to the faults in the former as being inherent because of its origins in special education and the benefits of the latter because it is a 'general education' approach.

We go down this route at our peril. In eschewing special education and promoting the idea that it is the nemesis of inclusion we stand to lose a great deal of expertise in our teaching workforce. University courses across Australia are deleting the words special education from their degree programs so as not to offend those who advocate for an inclusive approach. The changes in degree names also reflect the dropping of content that was the hallmark of a qualification that provided specialist knowledge to assist students who, for whatever reason, were not making adequate progress in school. This has become an ideological battle that detracts from the meeting of the needs of students who need our support and our expertise as professionals.

We shall continue to use the term RtI until we are provided with convincing evidence that supports an alternative model. This editorial reflects the continuing discussion of the MultiLit Research Unit on this issue and we thank our colleagues accordingly.

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