Keeping the Main Thing the Main Thing:
School Psychologists, RtI, and Asking the Right Questions

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Change is inevitable. For school psychologists, change involves continuously learning, as well as sharpening and refining our skills so that we are better prepared to serve students, families, schools, and communities. Despite being competent and perhaps excellent at what we have been trained to do, the success of the field hinges on remaining on the cutting edge of evidenced-based approaches in psychology and education. However, as we grow as individuals, and the field becomes better equipped to meet the needs of our diverse constituency, we must never lose sight of our fundamental purpose. To borrow a phrase from Stephen Covey, noted businessman and best-selling author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, school psychologists must *keep the main thing the main thing.*

The Question

While completing my graduate studies at Lehigh University, I learned a principle that has significantly influenced my professional practice. Like a refrain that echoed throughout a medley of courses, my peers and I were often asked, "What is the research question?" As budding school psychologists, we quickly realized that this simple query was central to all of our endeavors. In research, not only does the question inform the relevant literature that needs to be reviewed, critiqued, and synthesized, it also determines the participants, how they should be recruited, and the statistical procedures that are necessary to analyze any study's data.

Similarly, practitioners regularly engage in activities that are driven by answering specific questions. Through the lens of behavioral consultation, in brainstorming interventions to promote students' success, we must first understand their areas of difficulty. Before observing children in classrooms, we must know the concerns of their parents and teachers. Even when evaluating young people for a variety of educational disabilities, a clearly articulated question (e.g., the reason for referral) allows us to design assessment batteries that comprehensively and efficiently examine their cognitive, academic, social, emotional, behavioral, and adaptive functioning.

At some point in our training or careers, we have likely asked, or been asked, "Who are school psychologists?" Although many eloquent conceptualizations have been put forth that incorporate our multifaceted training as researchers, practitioners, providers of mental health support, and agents of systems change, another question is equally important: *why did we become school psychologists?*

The Approach

Virtually all school psychologists enter the profession in order to help children and improve the lives of young people. Returning to the premise that change is inevitable, school psychology has matured since its relatively recent inception. Regardless of our philosophical

stance on identifying students with disabilities (e.g., Specific Learning Disability; SLD), this remains one of our primary responsibilities. Whereas the ability-achievement discrepancy model was once the prevailing practice, over time, Response to Intervention (RtI) has grown in its popularity and acceptance throughout the field.

Despite the empirical support for this approach, I have witnessed the limitations and difficulties associated with implementing an RtI framework in schools. Beyond the realities of systems change and the availability of human capital to consistently provide evidence-based interventions to sometimes a significant number of students, many, including school psychologists, seem to overlook a fundamental premise of RtI. In informally polling various education professionals about its critical features, many describe RtI as a tiered system of support that also includes data-based decision making. While these responses are true, they are also incomplete in the absence of underscoring a foundational principle: quality Tier 1 (core) instruction. Admittedly, some argue that this goes without saying. Nevertheless, we should not assume that everyone understands this critical element upon which the model rests.

For the past several months, I have been thinking about data. As I often share with my students, data is simply information that must be interpreted in context. Therefore, when presented with data about children in school, what do we do with this information? In other words, are we asking the right questions? Specifically related to RtI, we are likely familiar with the three-tiered triangle that suggests 80 percent of students should meet grade level expectations through their exposure to core instruction (Tier 1); 15 percent require specialized intervention (Tier 2); and 5 percent could include students with disabilities who require the most intensive and individualized support in order to access the general education curriculum (Tier 3). While this premise is likely true, what about schools and school systems whose triangles may be inverted?

The Main Thing

Through its focus on systematic problem solving, school psychology aligns nicely with answering questions. Importantly, however, our answers are only as helpful as our ability to ask the right questions. For schools that have large numbers of students who are not meeting grade level expectations, first, why is this happening? Then, what should we do about it? Though both questions are necessary, they are fundamentally different. To answer the second question, we may recommend providing students with Tier 2 interventions. Alternatively, to answer the first question we must critically examine the reasons that explain why so many students are not meeting benchmark expectations.

Given the focus on RtI in recent years, albeit well intentioned and being grounded in solid science, it is worth considering the degree to which our efforts are misguided by prematurely intervening without first addressing systemic factors such as the quality of Tier 1 instruction. In other words, are we asking the right questions? Rather than starting with "what" questions (e.g., what interventions can we provide to support a student's decoding skills?), "why" questions may be more salient (e.g., why are so many students not meeting benchmark expectations?). Whereas "what" questions presume that the core instruction is of high quality, rigorous, effectively differentiated, and appropriately paced, "why" questions explore complex

contextual and systemic factors that are beyond students' control, but nonetheless contributory to their functioning in school.

In sum, I am not suggesting that RtI is ineffective to remediate students' academic skill weaknesses. In fact, some students indeed require targeted interventions. I am, however, encouraging school psychologists, as agents of systems change, to give careful consideration to the following questions:

1. How do we know that schools have high quality core instructional programs?
2. Especially for diverse learners, do our instructional programs include sufficient opportunities for differentiation in order to meet their cultural and linguistic needs?
3. If we have high quality core instructional programs, how do we ensure that teachers are implementing these programs with fidelity?

When a significant number of students are not making sufficient progress in the curriculum, the main thing is not our ability to design clever interventions and monitor progress. The main thing is redirecting our energy and resources to understand why this is happening. The main thing is addressing systemic barriers to ensure that all students have access to the highest quality educational experiences. In fact, more than universally screening and placing students in different tiers, which we do quite well, increased attention should be given to ensuring that all teachers are equipped to meet the needs of students who have diverse backgrounds and lived experiences. For school psychologists who are invested in improving outcomes for young people, seeking to understand why before suggesting what is more than a semantic difference but fundamentally necessary in order to keep the main thing the main thing.