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Abstract

Response to Intervention (RTI), and its current enhanced form reflected in Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, is one the largest educational reforms in recent history, with states adopting it for both special education placements and monitoring the academic, social, and emotional learning of all students. The present study utilizes data from a national survey of school counselors to investigate perceived school counselor preparedness in RTI. Direct and indirect effects are examined. Implications for pre- service and in-service training are discussed.

Keywords

School Counseling, Response to Intervention, Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, Professional Development, Collaboration

Author's Notes

Finalized Manuscript with APA 7 suggested edits in references

School counselors are mental health professionals who address the academic, college/career and social-emotional needs of all students (ASCA, n.d.). Moreover, they are called to navigate complex educational systems and mandates in order to enhance service delivery to K-12 learners (McMahon et al., 2014). The role of the school counselor has dramatically evolved and expanded in the past two decades, prompted by the demands of reform. Calls for change have come internally, from within the professional field, aiming to re-conceptualize or re-vision values and practice (Dahir & Stone, 2009). In the field of school counseling, the Transformed School Counseling Initiative (TSCI) called for school counselors to become agents of change, promoting educational equity for all students, particularly those who had been historically underserved (Sears, 1999). Additionally, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) led the charge for school counselors to codify their work through the development of the *ASCA National Model* (2005; 2012; 2019b), and the *Professional Standards and Competencies* (2019a), delineating a framework for comprehensive programs and appropriate mindsets and ethical behaviors required of school counselors to adequately address the evolving academic, college/career and social/emotional development of students.

Calls for reform can also be externally driven, from state or national directives that require districts and schools to make substantial changes. Response to Intervention (RTI), a schoolwide, multi-tiered system of academic support, is one example of external reform, brought to national attention by the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 as an alternative eligibility framework for the identification of learning disabilities (see IDEIA 2004, 20 USC §§ 1,400; Committee on the Workforce and Education, 2005). Recognizing the significance of this reform for professional practice, ASCA developed a position statement on RTI (2008) outlining the role that school counselors can play within the framework. In 2014, this statement

was revised to address Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS; 2014), a broader, schoolwide support framework for learners across academic, behavioral, and/or social-emotional domains.

The school-based professionals who must turn reform initiatives into concrete practice within schools are instrumental to the quality of the change; therefore, it is critical to understand those practitioners' knowledge and beliefs about the reform at hand (e.g., RTI/MTSS; Beavers, 2009). In order to provide a comprehensive context for investigating school counselors' engagement in this initiative, we first provide a brief overview of RTI/MTSS, discuss MTSS and the role of school counselors, and illuminate the relationships between knowledge, beliefs, context, and change in practice.

RTI and MTSS: Tiered Frameworks for Student Success

Response to Intervention (RTI) was developed to potentially remove the variable of "poor instruction" from the diagnosis of learning disability, as well as to reduce the over-representation of certain groups of students in special education (Fuchs et al., 2002; Fuchs et al., 2003; Harris-Murri et al., 2006). Research-based instruction, ongoing progress monitoring, and specific intervention to target areas of need are hallmarks of RTI, occurring within a tiered instructional framework (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; National Joint Committee on LD [NJCLD], 2005; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). Tier I is general education, with instructional practices grounded in research-based methods and ongoing benchmark testing. Progress monitoring must also be implemented to ensure sufficient growth of at-risk students. If a student does not meet benchmark goals in tier I, they move to tier II, which involves small group instruction to supplement tier 1. Such instruction typically occurs two to three times a week for 20-30 minutes per session. Continued progress monitoring at tier II enables determination of non-responsiveness to intervention, in which case the student moves to tier III, which includes more intensive and frequent intervention. Continued non-responsiveness at tier III typically leads to a referral for eligibility for specialized instruction

(Hollenbeck, 2007; National Joint Committee on LD [NJCLD], 2005; Mellard et al., 2004).

MTSS expands upon RTI models to integrate Positive Behavioral Supports (PBIS, (Averill & Rinaldi, 2011; Sadler, & Sugai, 2009). Rather than a solely academic focus, MTSS addresses academics, behavior, and social-emotional development for all learners via a tiered model with schoolwide accountability for research-based practices (Sugai & Horner, 2009). In a PBIS framework, tier I includes a school-wide framework for positive behavior support and methods for effective, research-based classroom management. The child who experiences emotional or behavioral difficulties will receive more specialized and/or frequent support in tier II. Continued challenges will prompt individualized, focused, research-based support in tier III, with referral for further testing as needed (Averill & Rinaldi, 2011; Sugai & Horner, 2006).

RTI and PBIS share common principles: a) the idea that the existing K-12 educational system does not sufficiently meet the needs of all learners, b) the belief that research-based instruction and/or emotional/behavioral supports can alleviate the challenges of many learners without referral to special education, and c) the understanding that every student has the right to appropriate supports prior to evaluation for special education placement (Sugai & Horner, 2009; Harris-Murri et al., 2006). Therefore, RTI/PBIS, packaged together as MTSS, share the goals of improving student outcomes as well as reducing the number of students referred for special education services through provision of research-based practices.

School Counselors and MTSS

With the implementation of MTSS throughout the country, school counselors have been encouraged to take a proactive role. As stated in ASCA's revised position statement (2014), "professional school counselors are stakeholders in the development and implementation of MTSS...[and] align their work with MTSS through the implementation of a Comprehensive School Counseling Program (CSCP) designed to improve student achievement and behavior" (p.

38). Studies have shown a positive linear relationship between school counseling programs closely aligned with the ASCA model (2012) and the implementation of MTSS with high fidelity (Donohue, 2014; Goodman-Scott & Grothaus, 2017a, 2017b). For example, Olsen and colleagues (2016) surveyed over four thousand school counselors about their knowledge and skills in MTSS and found that the more time school counselors spent on ASCA-aligned activities, the higher their level of competency in MTSS knowledge and skills.

Importantly, school counselor scholars have begun to recognize the power of MTSS to promote culturally relevant and fair practices in all three of the ASCA domains (personal/social, academic and career/college) and in each of the three tiers of MTSS (Belser et al., 2016; Betters-Bubon et al., 2016; Goodman-Scott et al., 2015). School counselors can provide evidence-based interventions both through direct and indirect services. Specifically, in Tier 1, school counselors offer services that include evidence-based core curriculum lessons aligned with MTSS goals and objectives (see Brigman & Webb, 2007, and Nese et al., 2014 as examples). Additionally, in Tier I, school counselors select school-wide programming (e.g., academic success skills training, behavioral expectations, suicide prevention) based on an analysis of overall school data (e.g., school report cards, discipline referrals, etc.). In Tier II, school counselor services are comprised of targeted interventions with increased intensity and frequency. For example, school counselors can facilitate weekly small group interventions for students with ongoing discipline and academic problems (Belser et al., 2016) as well as small groups for certain populations within the school in need of more assistance with post-secondary options (e.g. first generation, DREAMERS, etc.;Boden, 2011; Castleman & Page, 2014). Tier III school counseling services are highly individualized and include one-on-one mentoring and/or individual counseling which may lead to outside referrals for more intensive psychotherapy and/or further evaluation. Ongoing consultation

and collaboration with community partners as well as with parents/guardians may also be needed in Tier III (Ockerman et al., 2012; Ziomek-Daigle et al., 2016); in fact, collaboration with families/guardians should take place throughout the tiered process. Collaboration between schools and families, especially those with children with disabilities or at-risk for school failure, can serve as the foundation of meeting the needs of those students and ensure continuity of practices across settings, which is critical for academic, social, and emotional learning (Patrikakou, 2011; Turnbull, et al., 2009).

MTSS implementation, featuring school counselors in leadership roles, is associated with positive outcomes for students and schools. These include a decrease in the disproportionate numbers of minority youth cited in behavioral reports (Bettors-Bubon et al., 2016), fewer lost instructional days (Curtis et al., 2010), increased perceptions of school safety (Horner et al., 2010) and enhanced culturally responsive classrooms (Belser et al, 2016). Specifically, Bradshaw and colleagues (2012) found that schools implementing PBIS programs had fewer office discipline referrals (ODRs) and higher levels of student engagement and pro-social behavior. Moreover, when school counselors helped to spearhead MTSS, meaningful social-emotional as well as academic school-wide data was collected and analyzed to better serve all students (Harrington et al., 2016).

Given the augmented demands on school counselors' responsibilities with an MTSS framework, carefully designed training is of paramount importance. School counselors who indicated they spent less time on MTSS/ASCA-related activities also expressed a greater need for MTSS training (Olsen et al., 2016). School counselors' expressed need for enhanced training is an emergent trend in literature (Goodman-Scott & Grothaus, 2017b; Olsen et al., 2016). For example, when examining the school counselor's role with implementing RTI at the state and national levels,

school counselors believed they were unprepared for the key skills of data collection and management and the collaboration necessary to make RTI an effective framework (Ockerman et al., 2015; Patrikakou et al., 2016). It is also important to consider the impact of practitioners' perceived self-efficacy in successfully implementing tasks and responsibilities in a multi-tiered system of support, as discussed next.

Relationships between Knowledge, Beliefs, Context and Professional Practice

An individual's knowledge and beliefs are influenced by the particular context in which they are situated and impact understanding of a specific reform (Spillane et al., 2002). It is commonly understood that prior knowledge influences new learning (e.g., Bransford et al., 2000; Donovan et al., 1999; Posner et al., 1982). Our natural inclination is to assimilate new information with old, rather than changing mental schemas to accommodate new information (King, 2004). In addition, a practitioner's sense of self-efficacy in relation to a particular reform is influenced by their confidence in the tasks they are required to do when implementing the change; strong self-efficacy supports stronger opinions of reform initiatives (Nunn et al., 2009).

Beliefs also have a significant impact upon learning (e.g., Haney et al., 2002; Parajes, 1992). Teacher beliefs are commonly understood as "implicit assumptions about students, learning, classrooms, and the subject matter to be taught" (Kagan, 1992, p. 65-66). This description can be adapted for school counselors, including their assumptions about professional role and responsibilities, collegial collaboration, and academic/social-emotional development and supports. Individual beliefs about reform influence daily practice, as "personal beliefs function as the filter and foundation of new knowledge" (Posner et al., 1982, p. 75). Simply put, if a practitioner thinks a mandated change is out of alignment with personal beliefs, they may be less likely to put significant effort into its success (Flint et al., 2010; Richardson et al., 1991). ASCA recommends

that school counseling teams discuss their guiding beliefs early in the process of creating a CSCP to ensure a clear understanding of the multiple perspectives that will form the foundation of their program (ASCA, 2012) – a recommendation that is likewise critical for the implementation of any reform.

Finally, an individual's beliefs and knowledge must be considered within broader contexts: for example, the specifics of the organizational structure, culture, and thought communities of a school; district and state expectations and requirements; and the values of practice found in professional organizations (Spillane et al., 2002). These contextual factors influence an individual's sense-making, and thus are important to consider when implementing reform. For this reason, investigating how school counselors perceive actions of stakeholders and structures of support within their school is of paramount importance.

In exploring the factors that influence RTI-related beliefs, both leadership and clarity of roles emerge as robust factors that influence counselor perceptions of multi-tiered systems of support (Betters-Bubon, J. & Donohue, 2016; Ockerman et al., 2015; Patrikakou et al., 2016). A closer look at these variables will illuminate their impact on practitioners' perceptions, and consequently, the implementation of a multi-tiered initiative. To this end, we utilize data from a national survey of school counselors to examine direct and indirect effects on beliefs regarding the benefits of RTI. Specifically, the present study investigates the relationship among variables of perceived preparedness for RTI implementation, including those elements included in ASCA's National Model (2012), as well as the degree to which school counselors perceived RTI as beneficial for all students. Direct and indirect effects are investigated.

Research Question

What are the direct and indirect effects of school counselors' perceived preparedness for

RTI implementation, on their perception of RTI benefits for all students?

Method

Procedure

After receiving approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), authors contacted ASCA and obtained a mailing list of members who were school counselors and had noted that they wish to receive ASCA-approved mailings. Given the scope of the study and research questions, 15 states, which reported to implement RTI, either fully or partly, were targeted. Specifically, the following states were included in the sampling: Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island, West Virginia, and Wisconsin (Zirkel, 2011). Survey recipients were randomly selected from those available in each state. An IRB-approved cover letter was included along with the survey to introduce the researchers and the purpose of the study. A self-addressed, meter-mail envelope was also included for participants to return completed surveys.

Participants

From 2477 surveys mailed, 528 fully-completed surveys were returned. This 21.3% return rate is higher than online surveys investigating practitioner beliefs and school-based interventions (Cochrane & Laux, 2008; Sullivan et al., 2011). Surveys with incomplete items were not used to ensure sample stability in the analysis.

Analysis of demographic data indicated that 96% of participants were employed full-time with the majority (92%) working in public schools. Eighty-two percent were between 31 and 60 years old, and 85% were female. Eight-six percent self-identified as Caucasian, 8% Black, 4% Latino, and 2% noted "other." Thirty-five percent indicated working in a high school setting, 27% in elementary, 19% in middle school, and 14% reported as practicing in an elementary/middle school setting. The majority of respondents (81%) reported six years or more of practice as a school

counselor, with 73% indicating six years or more since their last degree (see Table 1).

Measures

The survey used in this study was constructed to investigate school counselors' perceived level of preparedness and attitudes toward RTI both theoretically and practically, based on prior instruments used in the investigation of school-based professionals in response to RTI (e.g., Hollenbeck & Patrikakou, 2014). Items on the instrument were developed to align with ASCA's National Model (2012), specifically, questions paralleled the four ASCA Model quadrants (accountability, delivery, foundation, and management) and surrounding themes (advocacy, collaboration, leadership and systemic change). For example, survey questions such as perceived preparedness for counseling interventions at each tier represented the delivery component, and items about data collection and data management systems were representative of the accountability component. Surrounding themes were also assessed through the survey, including items addressing leadership responsibilities and effective teamwork within the RTI framework.

The instrument was reviewed by experts in the field of counselor education, individuals involved in the research and practice of multi-tiered systems of support, who provided comments regarding domain relevance and importance of inclusion of individual test items. The survey was updated based on expert feedback and subsequently piloted with graduate students in a counselor educator program to ensure readability and user-friendly format. Practicing school counselors also completed the survey and provided additional feedback. Minor edits were made to improve format and readability. The finalized version of the survey was then disseminated via mail to a randomly selected sample, as described above.

Table 1*Participant Demographics**

	Percent
Currently Practicing	99
Full-time employment	96
Age	
25 or under	1
26-30	8
31-40	33
41-60	49
Over 60	9
Gender	
Female	85
Male	15
Race	
Black	8
Caucasian	86
Latino/a	4
Other	2
School Population	
Elementary	27
Elementary/Middle	14
Middle School	19
Middle/High School	4
High School	35
K-12	1
Years in Practice	
1-5 years	19
6-10 years	36
11-15 years	19
16+ years	26
Years Since Final Degree	
1-5 years	27
6-10 years	34
11-15 years	17
16+ years	22

Note. $N = 528$

The survey was comprised of five parts. The first section addressed demographics (e.g., “age, employment status, years in the field”). The second section involved questions regarding RTI training and implementation (e.g., “How many professional development sessions have you received in relation to RTI?”; “What year did your school implement an RTI framework?”). The third section contained 14 Likert-type items asking participants about their perceived level of preparation towards specific aspects of RTI (e.g., “How prepared are you in these different areas of RTI? Underlying rationale, counseling interventions for tier I”). Ratings included 1 = “not prepared,” 2 = “somewhat prepared,” 3 = “adequately prepared,” and 4 = “expertly prepared.” The fourth part included 14 Likert-type questions measuring participants’ beliefs and practices (e.g., “RTI is the best option to support struggling learners”; “RTI is a vehicle for promoting culturally responsive practices”). Ratings to measure beliefs and practices were as follows: “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “agree,” and “strongly agree.” The fifth section addressed changes to school counselors’ responsibilities due to RTI via seven yes or no questions, such as “I am now involved in data collection and/or data management in support of RTI decisions.” Lastly, an open-ended question encouraged participants to share any additional thoughts on RTI and its implementation.

Scales

For the purpose of this study’s analysis, eight scales were constructed. As a measure of internal consistency, Cronbach’s Alpha (α) was computed for each of the eight scales. For scales with more than two items, Cronbach’s α was calculated with and without each of the scale’s items to determine whether dropping an item would increase the scale’s internal consistency. There was no occasion in which the deletion of an item increased the α coefficient; therefore, no changes were made to the scales. Alpha coefficients ranged from .75 to .94.

Data Analysis

Multicollinearity Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) were calculated to test for multicollinearity in relation to the direct effects regression model. All VIFs were under 4, well below the 10 threshold that is used to raise concerns regarding multicollinearity (O'Brien, 2007).

For the structural equation modeling analysis, AMOS was used to estimate the direct and indirect effects of the model. Initially, direct relationships were measured on perception of RTI as beneficial for all students, including those with behavioral or learning concerns. Next, researchers tested indirect effects by examining whether the variables that did not have a statistically significant direct effect on perceived RTI benefit had indirect effects when perceived leadership and understanding roles and responsibilities served as latent variables.

Results

The guiding research question of the present study investigated the relationship among variables of the perceived preparedness of school counselors in regard to essential aspects of RTI implementation, with the degree to which school counselors considered this multi-tiered system of support as beneficial for both academic and behavioral learning. The variables of perceived leadership, and clarity of roles and responsibilities within a tiered model, were latent variables in the model. Direct and indirect effects were examined.

Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were generated to provide an overall picture of participant responses. School counselors reported they were either adequately or expertly prepared in a few aspects of RTI, such as understanding the general tier delivery model (69%) and counseling interventions for Tier I (68%). Perceived preparedness in other areas was significantly lower, with the minority of respondents reporting adequate or expert preparation. For example, only 36% considered themselves adequately or expertly prepared to use schoolwide data management systems for

documentation and decision-making. In addition, 55% of school counselors responded that their roles and responsibilities changed due to RTI implementation in their state, and 41% reported that one of those changes was to be involved in data collection and/or management in support for RTI: a task for which most did not feel well prepared.

Regression Analysis

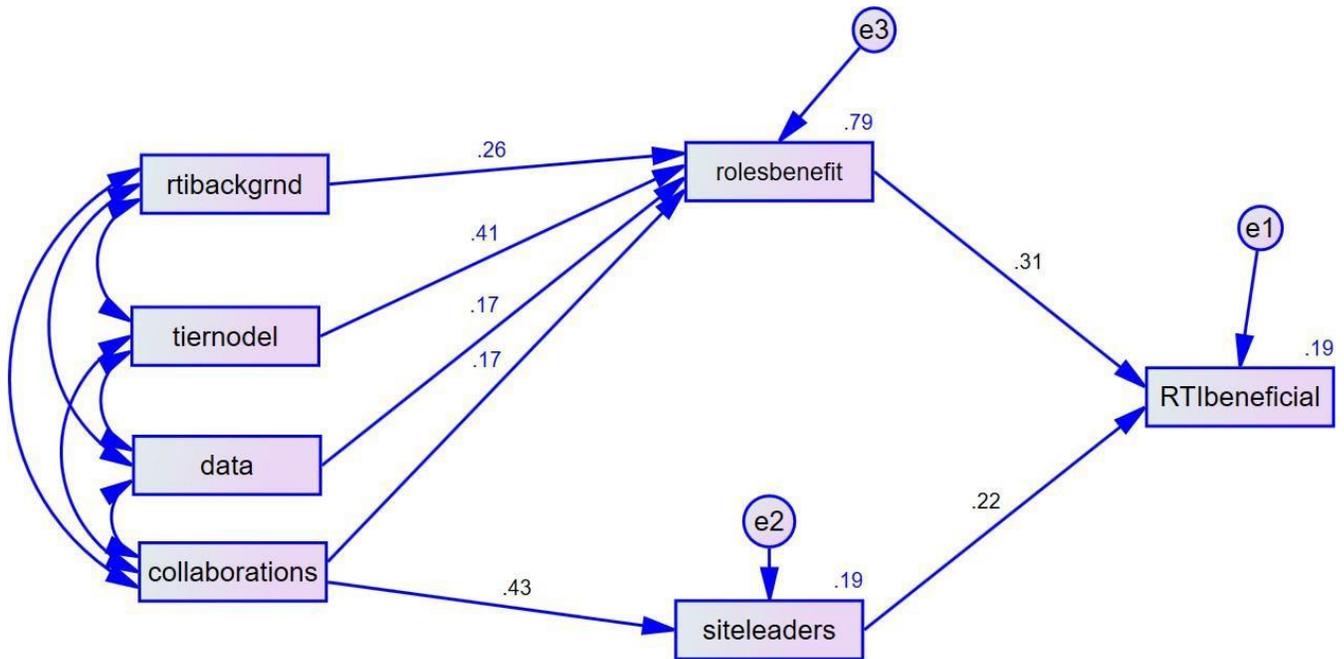
Prior to testing the structural equation model, the researchers used regression analysis to examine direct effects of model variables on RTI being viewed as beneficial. The R^2 was .21 and the regression model was a good fit for the data ($F = 19.774$; $p < .001$). Only two variables had statistically significant direct effects on perceived RTI benefits at the $p < .001$ level: perceived leadership competence ($\beta = .22$; $b = .15$), and understanding the specific roles, responsibilities and benefits of RTI ($\beta = .34$; $b = .20$). Bootstrapping (N samples = 2000; Efron & Tibshirani, 1994) was also performed for the regression coefficients to further investigate whether the present study's sample distribution was a good approximation to the population distribution. Results supported the same coefficient statistical significance (95% BCas [.102,.311], and [.080,.217]) for perceived leadership competence and understanding roles and responsibilities.

Structural Equation Model

Variables that did not have direct effects on perceived RTI benefits in the regression analysis were investigated for indirect effects, with perceived leadership and clarity of roles and responsibilities within a tiered model serving as the mediating variables. A structural equation modeling (SEM) approach was used to test the mediating role of perceived leadership and clarity of roles and responsibilities within a tiered framework. To examine goodness of fit, researchers used multiple fit indices. Specifically, the first index used was the Comparative Fit Index (CIF; Bentler, 1990). The CIF value was .995, larger than .95, which is an indication of good fit (Blunch, 2013; Hu & Bentler, 1999). The second fit index used was the Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI; Tucker

& Lewis, 1973). The TLI value was .986 indicating good fit, as values near 1.00 are being perceived as such indication (Byrne, 2010). In summary, the full model was a good fit ($\chi^2 = 21.52$, $p = .006$; CFI = .995, TLI = .986, NFI = .991, and RMSEA = .057 [90% CI = .028 to .086]). The variance accounted for perceived roles and responsibilities was .793 and for site leadership perceptions was .187. Figure 1 depicts the significant model paths. Table 2 shows the standardized path coefficients, standard errors, and significance levels obtained through bootstrapping.

Figure 1. Structural equation model with standardized path coefficients.



Lastly, the *Root Mean Square Error of Approximation* was used as a population-based fit (RMSEA; Steiger, 2016). With a value of .053 the model is considered to be a good fit, as values close to .05 are considered signs of good fit (Blunch, 2013).

The only exogenous variable that had significant indirect effects both through clarity of roles and responsibilities (.17) and perceived site leadership (.43) was collaborative practices.

School counselors who felt prepared to engage in teamwork within the school and with families had greater clarity of roles and responsibilities and perceived their site leaders more positively, which resulted in more positive views of RTI as a framework of student support.

Remaining exogenous variables had significant indirect effects only through perceived clarity of roles and responsibilities. School counselors who felt prepared regarding general aspects of a tiered service delivery model, such as its underlying rationale and structure, as well as felt confident in using and managing data and engaging in collaborative practices, reported increased clarity of their roles and responsibilities within a tiered model. That, in turn, led those school counselors to view a tiered service model as the best option to support all students with academic and social and emotional learning. The strongest indirect effect through clarity of roles and responsibilities was that originating from understanding the general structure of a tiered service delivery model.

Table 2*Statistically significant standardized path coefficients*

	Path value	Estimate	SE	<i>p</i>
Measurement	Clarity of roles & responsibilities by:			
	RTI background	.262	.028	<.001
	Tiered model	.407	.030	<.001
	Data use	.172	.034	<.001
	Collaborations	.171	.034	<.001
Measurement	Perceived site leadership by:			
	Collaborations	.432	.030	<.001
Direct Paths on RTI perceived as beneficial	Clarity of roles & responsibilities by:	.308	.029	<.001
	Perceived site Leadership	.218	.025	<.001
Indirect Paths on RTI perceived as beneficial	Clarity of roles & responsibilities by:			
	RTI background	.049	.010	<.001
	Tiered model	.073	.012	<.001
	Data use	.028	.009	<.001
	Collaborations	.027	.008	<.001
	Perceived site leadership by:			
	Collaborations	.049	.012	<.001
Sum of Indirect		.226	.025	<.001

Discussion

MTSS is the largest educational reform in recent history, with states adopting it for both general education and special education populations as a means to address academic and behavioral aspects of learning. Previous research underscores the profound influence of knowledge, beliefs, and context on school practitioners' confidence in, and subsequent efforts towards, successful implementation of RTI initiatives (Nunn et al., 2009; Spillane et al., 2002). The present study further investigated the variables that influence beliefs about the benefits of RTI by examining direct and indirect effects.

Results from the present study illustrate that perceived preparedness in key aspects of RTI affects the way school counselors view their own role as well as that of school leaders. In turn, these perceptions significantly influence practitioner views about the overall value of RTI. Namely, if school counselors had a solid understanding of (a) the historical background and an underlying rationale of multi-tiered models of support, (b) the structure and function of tiers in such a model, (c) teamwork and collaboration amongst school personnel as well as between schools and families, and (d) the use of data collection and management to inform decisions in such a framework, they were more likely to have positive perceptions of RTI as a beneficial model for student support.

School counselors can benefit from targeted training to gain knowledge about the specific components of RTI/MTSS frameworks and gain confidence in the multiple levels and demands of implementation. Such training is essential in building higher levels of capacity to implement comprehensive school counseling programs (Dahir et al., 2009). To best understand their roles in RTI, school counselors need to understand the *what*, *why*, and *how* of the initiative. Understanding the historical background and the underlying rationale of multi-tiered models of support, as well

as the structure and function of tiers in such a model, represents the *what* and *why* of RTI training (what RTI looks like and why it is important). In considering *how* to implement RTI, the elements that arose as most critical to school counselors involved collaboration and data collection and management.

Especially, given that school counselors are viewed as part of a school's administrative and leadership team (Dahir et al., 2010), being able to (a) effectively work with other school personnel as well as families, and (b) use and manage data will enable school counselors to develop positive views of their own roles as well as the roles of others within an MTSS framework. Augmenting the challenge of preparing school counselors for success, traditional professional development tends to emphasize the *what* of new initiatives, and occasionally the *why*, without equal attention paid to the *how* in the context of professional practice (Kratochwill et al., 2007). Results of the present study indicate that such a limited focus in professional development may not yield a robust perception of confidence, particularly for those school counselors who feel less secure with collaborative practices and data use. This, in turn, may cause some to perceive RTI as another vacuous, top-down mandate. Following the path of influence, analysis indicated that feeling well-prepared in the *what*, *why*, and *how* shaped perception of preparedness, which, in turn, resulted in a more positive attitude toward RTI. Prior research demonstrates that positive attitudes toward an initiative lead to a more systematic and successful implementation (e.g., Spillane et al., 2002). For school counselors this is particularly evident when professional development stresses the *what*, *why* and the *how* of ASCA-aligned activities, including data-driven decision making and collaboration in the context of RTI/MTSS (Olsen et al., 2016; Patrikakou et al., 2016).

Implications for Improved Practice and Future Research

Results highlight two ASCA-related variables that influence school counselors' positive beliefs about RTI: namely, collaboration and data collection/use. This finding supports previous

studies demonstrating a fundamental relationship between ASCA-aligned activities and Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) status with MTSS knowledge and implementation (Goodman-Scott & Grothaus, 2017a; Olsen et al., 2016). When school counselors can align their current work with MTSS, they have an increased capacity for leadership (Better-Bubon & Donohue, 2016), are able to make data-driven decisions (Harrington et al, 2016), and positively impact their school climate (Goodman-Scott & Grothaus, 2017a).

With the increased application of the ASCA National Model (2005, 2012; 2019b) and CSCPs, the roles and responsibilities of school counselors have shifted, enabling some practitioners to become integral members of the school community and leaders in transformational educational practices that benefit all learners. Thus, while recent school counseling graduates may have current knowledge of their roles and responsibilities related to ASCA and multi-tiered systems of support, many in-service practitioners were trained prior to the implementation of these initiatives, and may not have received comprehensive professional development in the *what, why* and importantly, *how* of RTI. Consequently, these professionals may feel less confident regarding the integral skill sets of collaboration and data use. Subsequently, it is critical that in-service training includes these core elements and accounts for the needs of practitioners who have not been trained in ASCA implementation and multi-tiered models. Findings of this present study also support the need to assess counselors' knowledge and skills in relation to MTSS and its core practices to inform the development of effective training programs (Olsen et al., 2016; Sink & Ockerman, 2016). The following elements should be central to RTI/MTSS training opportunities: familiarization with the nuts and bolts of multi-tiered initiatives and why they are critical in today's schools, methods of data collection and management to support student growth, as well as evidence-based strategies for collaboration both within the school, and between school and

families. Pre-assessment of school counselors' knowledge and confidence in relation to these key areas will further support more targeted and meaningful professional development.

Moreover, results of this study indicate that if school counselors have robust training in these critical skill sets and feel well-prepared, they are more likely to believe RTI can improve students' academic and behavioral outcomes, and that RTI is as a vehicle to promote culturally responsive services. As such, positive perceptions coupled with greater self-efficacy in ASCA-aligned skills can increase school counselors' buy-in of, and in turn advance the effectiveness of, RTI/MTSS implementation (Nunn et al., 2009; Olsen et al., 2016; Spillane et al., 2002).

With the rapid technological advances available in daily life, tools such as data collection and management applications as well as data organization and progress monitoring platforms can be utilized to simplify the data-based decision-making processes involved in RTI/MTSS, improve and systematize data collection and management, and also maximize school counselors' time and efficiency. In addition, technology and media should be integrated to facilitate training efforts and enhance outreach to key stakeholders, including families (Sabella et al., 2010; Steele et al., 2018). For example, in relation to the readiness of school counselors to participate within an RTI/MTSS framework, online modules could be developed in relation to tools for data management, evidence-based strategies for collaboration, and/or the fundamentals of tiered-service delivery models and rationale. These tools could augment face-to-face training opportunities, and also create opportunities for practitioners to review and practice key skills necessary within MTSS.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should evaluate professional development programs that aim to address the needs expressed by the national sample of school counselors in the present study. Specifically, assessing pre-service and in-service training in the context of RTI/MTSS, integrated with the

ASCA model, can provide a comprehensive picture of CSCP impact. Such an evaluation seems critical, given the positive impact of MTSS on K-12 students' academic and social-emotional development (Dimmitt & Wilkerson, 2012; Marin & Filce, 2013) as well as to the promotion of culturally responsive school counseling interventions (Belser et al., 2016; Betters-Bubon et al., 2016).

Limitations

Inherent in survey research is its self-reported nature. Participants may have over-rated or under-reported their skills and knowledge and/or their perceived efficacy. Respondents might also have inaccurately recalled the extent of training and preparation, resulting in erroneous reporting. Data utilized in this study were collected by surveying ASCA school counselors in 15 states, those which reported implementing RTI partly or fully at the time of survey distribution. Therefore, results can be generalized to ASCA members from these selected states. Participants in this study were primarily female and Caucasian (85% and 86% respectively). However, this is not a lack of diversity specific to this study, as participants were randomly selected, but rather reflective of the lack of diversity in practicing school counselors. Twenty eight membership demographics reported by ASCA indicate that 85% of school counselors are female and 81% Caucasian (ASCA, 2018). Lastly, it should be taken into consideration that given developmental differences and practice demands, perceptions of RTI may vary depending on the grade levels in which school counselors are practicing.

Conclusion

Within a continuous model of educational reform, practitioners sometimes lose focus on the basics of best practice as they are inundated with new mandates and rising pressure to enhance student outcomes in increasingly data-driven and competitive environments. In addition,

practitioners may feel unprepared as an outcome of their preservice or in-service training. The better understanding that school counselors have regarding the *what*, *why* and *how* of any reform initiative, the better they can advance educational reform and change. As in-service and pre-service school counselors are prepared to implement RTI/MTSS, they should be well-versed not only in the broader initiative and its overarching goals, but also in the specifics of its implementation, as outlined in the ASCA MTSS position statement (ASCA, 2014). Such a focus will continue to move school counselors into their rightful place amongst educational professionals as advocates and leaders within the educational community.

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