Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Implementation Tools for Speech-Language Pathologists in Education

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Preface

This is a book about reframing what it means to be a school-based speech-language pathologist (SLP). SLPs are trained to help students with disabilities. However, the spirit of the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework is to think about the educational system as a whole. In an MTSS framework, SLPs move away from the concept of differentiating "our" students from other students. Instead, SLPs think about how to use our unique skillset to drive positive outcomes for *all* students.

Having worked in public schools as an SLP myself for years, I know firsthand about the busy daily lives of school-based SLPs. I know that the time spent conducting assessments, implementing individualized education plans (IEPs), and applying evidence-based practice hardly leaves school-based SLPs with a sense that they have any extra time. In fact, meeting the needs of students with identified speech-language disabilities can feel like *more* than a full-time job. The difficulty of reaching beyond the caseload to consider the needs of all students is real. However, I am convinced that SLPs can make a meaningful difference by embracing the MTSS framework. In doing so, they have the potential to better serve the needs of students with and without identified disabilities, and to do so more proactively.

My intention in writing this book was to provide SLPs with a useful resource rather than an extended theoretical explanation that leaves practitioners to fill in the specifics. With this goal in mind, during the summer and fall of 2019, I reached out to SLPs working in public schools all over the country to learn about their experiences with MTSS. My conversations included SLPs in big cities, suburbs, small towns, and rural areas. I spoke with both new and experienced SLPs. In all, I talked to SLPs from 19 different school districts. These conversations with SLPs motivated, grounded, and challenged me.

Practical Realities

A major takeaway from my conversations is that SLPs have challenging jobs. So many SLPs described their huge caseloads (I spoke with several SLPs who provide direct services to nearly 100 students), the minimal space they were given to work in (some SLPs worked in closets and others just had rolling carts), and the lack of budget to buy resources. I identified with these SLPs. As a former school-based SLP, I faced many of these same obstacles.

One complaint I often heard was that involvement in MTSS just seems unrealistic given the existing workload. I knew that framing MTSS as just "one more thing" really wouldn't cut it for SLPs given their already highly demanding workload and the logistical difficulties of their jobs. This book focuses on practical research-based tools and insights into how SLPs can balance the demands of working within the special education framework with supporting general education students.

Collectively, We Have Questions!

So many SLPs struggled with how to get involved with MTSS and questioned if they were doing things the "right" way. In my conversations, many SLPs expressed curiosity about how other SLPs were making sense of MTSS. So many questions came up about MTSS in general, how to address roadblocks, what kind of data to collect, how to collaborate with other educators, how to define the SLP role, and what instructional approaches to take for students. Based on these pressing questions that weigh on our minds collectively, I have decided to organize my book largely as a series of questions and answers. This book tackles questions about the policy implications of the MTSS framework, applicability of the framework to SLPs' roles in schools and how SLPs can implement MTSS in their practice.

Ideas From Research and the Field

There is extensive research relevant to MTSS, however, it can be challenging for practitioners to synthesize multiple studies and translate the ideas into their practice. On the other hand, many SLPs in the field have developed practical methods for techniques that are supported by research but their methods aren't widely known. This book is an effort to bring the worlds of research and practice together. One thing I've heard many times is that all SLPs need a few "tricks up their sleeves" or "tools in their toolbox." Jumping off this metaphor, I have designed the largest section of this book as an SLP MTSS Toolkit. The toolkit features ideas for how SLPs can support the Common Core State

Standards, address speech-specific issues such as articulation, as well as help support students' social-emotional skills within an MTSS framework. These tools come from the collective wisdom of the community of both practitioners and researchers in the field. Some of the tools, rubrics, and templates come directly from practicing SLPs as noted throughout the book. Additionally, I have highlighted real-world snapshots of MTSS in action based on the experiences of SLPs in the field. Throughout, I explain the research that underpins my ideas for tools and approaches that SLPs can use within MTSS.

Final Thoughts

In closing this preface, I'd like to offer a final reflection of how necessary MTSS will continue to be for the field of education and especially for SLPs. As this book is moving toward the production stage in the spring of 2020, schools throughout the world are facing an unprecedented challenge due to the COVID-19 public health emergency. With students out of physical school buildings, educators are being forced to halt face-to-face instruction and support for students. SLPs are scrambling to adopt new ways to support students through teletherapy and home packets. While the impact of this unprecedented use of virtual instruction on students' collective academic progress remains unknown at this time, it seems certain that this situation will negatively impact student academic progress across the board. Further, it is likely the most vulnerable populations of students (i.e., students with disabilities, English language learners, and students from historically disadvantaged racial and cultural backgrounds) will be impacted most intensely. In the upcoming school years, educators will need to work harder

than ever before to put interventions and supports into place to help students catch up from the lost learning opportunities during this time.

While I believe the relevancy and importance of the MTSS model was true before this crisis, I think the need for this framework will be all the more necessary in the times following this public health emergency. By taking an active role in supporting students through an MTSS framework, SLPs can play a key part in the essential effort of supporting the academic success of all students. By reaching beyond our caseload and working within an MTSS framework, SLPs can demonstrate their commitment to being part of the collective effort in public education to support the needs of all students regardless of their background, circumstances, or the challenges they face. It is my hope this book provides SLPs with tools, ideas, and inspiration to be impactful within this framework.

3 Introduction to the MTSS Toolkit

Purpose of Chapter 3

The purpose of Chapter 3 is to introduce the multi-tiered SLP toolkit, which offers 22 concrete and practical ways that SLPs can play an active role within an MTSS framework. Whereas it is one thing to buy into the idea that SLPs can have an active role in MTSS, it is another to know what to do "on Monday morning" to get started. To this end, the toolkit introduced in this chapter is focused on practical and implementable strategies for SLPs.

How Is the Toolkit Organized?

The toolkit covers three main areas: tools related to supporting the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts (CCSS for ELA), tools related to supporting speech-related issues such as articulation, voice, and fluency, and tools to support the social and emotional aspects of language use, as shown in Figure 3–1. The first area, CCSS for ELA, is divided into multiple chapters (Chapters 4 to 7), and the other areas are covered in one chapter each (Chapter 8 for Speech Sound Disor-ders, Stuttering, and Fluency, and Chapter 9 for Social-Emotional Skills).

Area #1: CCSS for ELA Toolkit

SLPs play a major role in supporting student progress within academics and the CCSS. In her book titled *Common Core Standards and the Speech-Language Pathologist: Standards-Based Intervention for Special Populations*, Lissa A. Power-deFur (2016) argues:

> The CCSS provide an opportunity for speech-language pathologists to change the common perception of their role from that of speech therapy ancillary to the curriculum to speech-language services that are a vital part of the school teams' striving to ensure mastery by all students. (p. 11)

This underscores the idea that focusing on the CCSS is an opportunity to contribute to education in a concrete and meaningful manner. These tools are designed to provide concrete ideas to support this initiative.

This area of the toolkit is divided into four main sections: speaking and listening, reading, writing, and language. These sections correspond to the four main
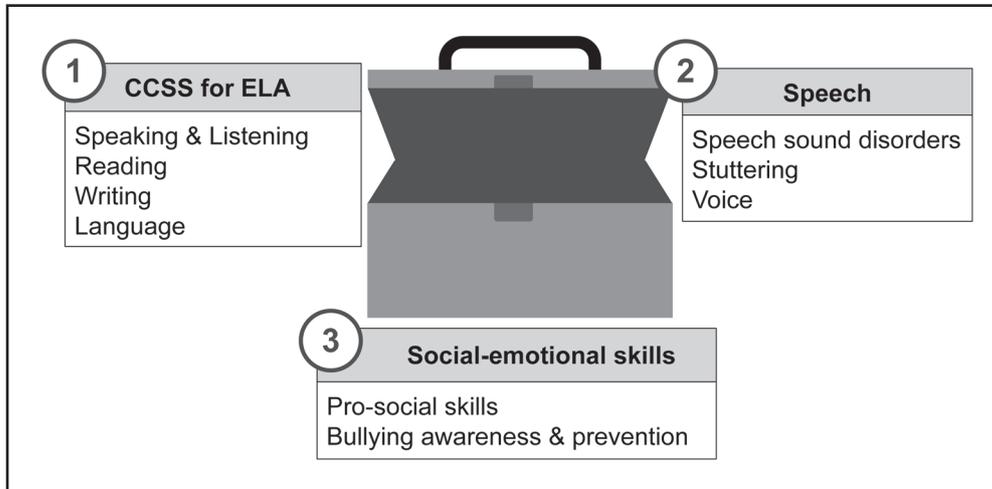
Figure 3–1. Organization of the multi-tiered SLP toolkit.

strands within the CCSS for ELA across Grades K–12. There are five tools in the speaking and listening chapter, six tools in the reading chapter, three tools in the writing chapter, and three tools in the language chapter. Many of the tools include several activities that SLPs can implement right away.

Knowing that SLPs work with multiple grade levels, the toolkit does not focus on grade-specific standards but rather on College and Career Readiness (CCR) anchor standards that apply across *all* grades. The only exception to this are tools focused on reading foundational skills, which do not have anchor standards but only grade-specific standards for K–5. Because struggling students may not be performing at the expected grade level, focusing on strands and anchor standards allows SLPs to identify students' zones of proximal development and provide necessary scaffolding to support student progress.

Area #2: Speech Toolkit

SLPs can also address speech-specific issues within an MTSS framework. Within public schools, SLPs are considered the experts in speech-specific issues like articulation, fluency, and voice so this area is a natural fit (Ukrainetz & Fresquez, 2003). The speech toolkit is divided into three areas: speech sound disorders, stuttering, and voice. There is one tool for each area.

Area #3: Social-Emotional Skills Toolkit

SLPs have a role within MTSS for supporting students' social and emotional skills and the use of language for social purposes. These efforts can involve close collaboration with other school personnel with expertise in this area, such as counselors and school psychologists. Work in this area can contribute to school-wide programs as well as support the needs of specific students. There are two tools in this area.

Are These Ideas an Exhaustive List?

The toolkit is by no means meant to be representative of all the possible ways that SLPs can be involved in MTSS. In fact, such a task would be impossible as there are endless potential approaches. Further, each SLP is going to face unique circumstances regarding their particular workload, the needs of the school(s) they serve, the culture of the district, state policies, and other issues. As discussed in Chapter 2, decision-making is a necessary first step in the process of being involved with MTSS as an SLP.

How Were Tools Selected for Inclusion in the Toolkit?

Four key criteria guided the selection of the tools for the toolkit. These ideas are summarized in Figure 3–2 and explained below:

■ Tools that are flexible and adaptable: The tools can be used to meet the needs of students at different tiers by modifying the level of scaffolding and intensity. Most tools can be used at all grade levels and can be applied in a variety of settings and formats. For example, most tools can be implemented directly in a 1:1, small-group, or whole-class setting. For the tools related to the CCSS, the toolkit was designed to be flexible and adaptable by generally aligning the tools with the CCR anchor standards that span *all* grade levels.

■ Tools with a strong research basis: Every tool is grounded in research. The research supporting certain tools is drawn from literature about serving students with disabilities. In other cases, research is drawn from the field of education more generally. Looking at both bodies of literature is consistent with the idea of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which

Key Factors for Tool Selection			
✓	Flexible and adaptable		
	➜ Meets the needs of students at different tiers		
	➜ Applicable to most grade levels		
	➜ For a variety of settings or formats (1:1, group, whole class)		
✓	Evidence-based		
✓	Straightforward implementation requiring basic, inexpensive materials		
✓	Ability to be modeled for and implemented by other educators		
✓	Integrates oral and written language components		

Figure 3–2. Criteria for selecting tools in the toolkit.

Box 3–1. Real-World Snapshot: SLPs Modeling and Consulting for Other Educators Using Varying Tools and Strategies

Pam Waterhouse has over 30 years of experience as a school-based SLP and works in many schools in British Columbia. Pam spends a large part of her time as a school-based SLP, not on providing services to individual students, but rather on understanding the curriculum and collaborating with teachers to ensure all students can access the curriculum and make progress academically. She explains her mind-set with teachers as, "I am here to help you. What can I do to help you? What are your concerns? I want to be there as a resource. Let me bring you something, let me show you something, let me do a sample lesson for you or make you a visual." Pam explains, "As a school SLP, the school is our client. The question needs to be what can I do for the school, not what can I do for 48 different clients."

Because Pam spends so much time consulting with teachers, she feels she is able to contribute to the ideal of having excellent programming in place for her students five days a week. She also feels that the emphasis on professional development (PD) and in-classroom modeling sends a nonverbal message to teachers that they are competent professionals in supporting language learning. In her view, when school SLPs fill up their schedules with back-to-back students, they become far too busy to communicate with teachers. This sends a nonverbal message to teachers that remediation of communication disorders is only the SLP's job and that teachers have only a small role to play. Pam has received feedback from both teachers and administrators that they appreciate her approach because it focuses on building capacity within the school staff.

In addition to working with individual teachers, Pam runs workshops for teachers in her province on strategies for working with diverse learners. Some of the topics she has covered include Practicing Articulation in the Classroom, Universal Design for Learning and Integration, Literacy for Struggling Readers, and Narrative Language. For each topic, she highlights the evidence of how the skills being taught pertain to better outcomes, demonstrates strategies and approaches for practicing skills (by using video models of herself or teachers in their classrooms), and provides some materials to try immediately.

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highlights how designing learning environments with accessibility as a guiding framework benefits a diverse group of learners. Additionally, one key finding from research is the strong relationship between oral and written language (Kamhi & Catts, 2014). Given this, whenever possible, tools were selected that utilized both oral and written modalities. Many tools included examples of relevant texts to use when implementing the tool to highlight the importance of incorporating written material, especially children's and young adult literature, into SLPs' practices.

- Tools with straightforward implementation procedures: The tools included in the toolkit mostly require basic supplies available in schools. The tools deliberately emphasize making use of curricular materials and children's literature where applicable. Although some relevant commercially available programs are mentioned, tool selection focuses on noncommercial approaches to skill development that use basic materials readily available to school-based SLPs.
- Tools that can be modeled for and then implemented by other educators: Within an MTSS framework, SLPs may provide professional development, consult with teachers, model strategies for other educators, as well as provide direct intervention to whole classes, small groups, or individual students. Given these many possibilities, the vast majority of tools in the toolkit can be implemented by a variety of educators and not exclusively by SLPs. To highlight this, the descriptions of many tools refer to an instructor, which could be an SLP, as the one leading implementation.

Are the Tools Really Appropriate Across All the Tiers? How Is It Possible to Alter the Intensity of Each Tool So That It Is Appropriate at Different Tiers?

Altering the levels of scaffolding, dosage, and group size of instructional approaches allows tools to be modified to be appropriate for different tiers. There are multiple ways to increase the intensity of support, including dosage (minutes, frequency, and duration of instruction), group size, and support provided during a lesson (Mellard et al., 2010). Tools can be used across Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3 given appropriate adjustments. Possible adjustments are described below and summarized in Figure 3–3.

- Scaffolding: Some students need more support to learn new strategies, content, and skills because of learning differences, styles, processing time, or processing issues. Therefore, the same general approach within Tier 1 might apply to students with greater
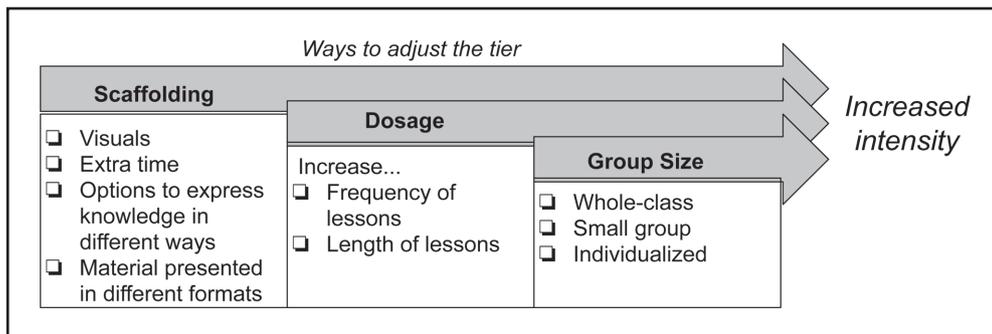
Figure 3–3. Ways to modify the tools to be appropriate for different tiers.