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MTSS and Inclusive Education Across Diverse School Contexts

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Abstract

Purpose: Multi-Tiered Systems of Supports (MTSS) organize universal, targeted, and intensive support, but a tiered structure alone does not establish inclusive education. This conceptual article examines the contextual considerations that should guide MTSS across diverse school settings.

Methodology: It draws on a selective narrative review of peer-reviewed research, scholarly books, international reports, and professional guidance. Sources are interpreted in relation to three objectives: connecting MTSS components with inclusion, examining contextual considerations, and synthesizing implications for organizing and reviewing support. Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective informs the interpretation of relationships between learners and their environments.

Findings: The discussion identifies language and cultural context, staff expertise, collaborative time, resources, student and family participation, and review of support as relevant considerations. It argues that provision should be examined through both consistent delivery and learners' access, participation, and progress. Published figures illustrate policy arrangements, tier movement, adoption, and framework components; they do not collectively establish effectiveness.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Practice and Policy: The article contributes a synthesis connecting the organization of tiered support with the conditions surrounding its delivery. Its practical and policy implications concern coordination, participation, and the capacity needed to translate inclusive commitments into provision. As a conceptual discussion, it offers neither an empirical evaluation nor a validated implementation model.

Keywords: *Ecological perspective, Inclusive education, Learner needs, multi-tiered systems of supports, Support coordination*

1.Introduction

Schools can share a commitment to inclusion while operating under different educational conditions. A multilingual secondary school with specialist staff faces different decisions from a school with limited assessment tools or few opportunities for collaborative planning. Such variation raises a practical question: how can schools organize additional support without assuming that one implementation arrangement is suitable everywhere? This article addresses that question through MTSS and keeps the discussion focused on the organization of support rather than curriculum design.

UNESCO (2020) describes inclusion as a continuing process of addressing barriers and valuing learners. Its Global Education Monitoring Report reported that laws in 25% of countries provided education in separate settings for students with disabilities and that almost half of low- and middle-income countries collected no administrative data on students with disabilities. These historical findings illustrate differences in policy and information infrastructure; they are not current estimates for every country and do not establish the effectiveness of MTSS. They provide a reason to examine the conditions under which decisions about support are made.

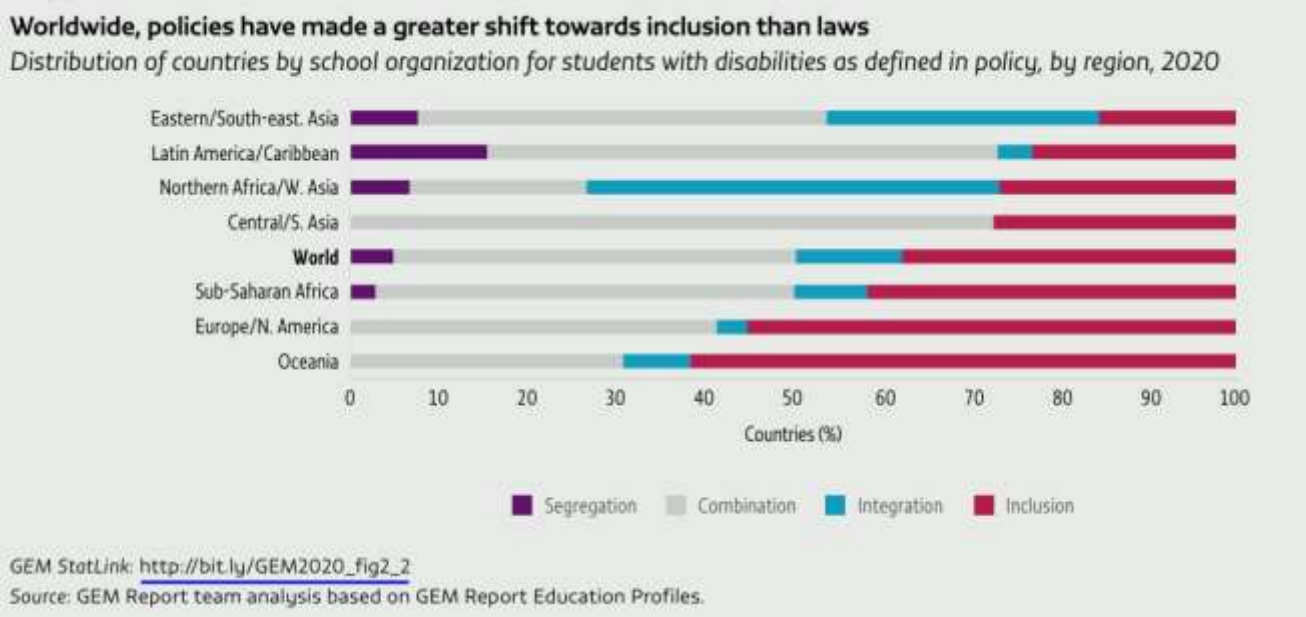

Figure: 1: *Organize Education through Policy*

Source: (UNESCO, 2020)

Figure 1 differentiates between inclusion, in which education systems adapt to learners; integration, in which learners enter mainstream settings but are required to fit current arrangements; segregation in separate settings; and mixes of mainstream and separate provision. Globally, 38% of countries supported inclusion in policy, 45% combination, 12% integration, and 5% segregation (UNESCO, 2020). Policy commitments do not determine classroom

implementation. In this paper, they address the question of whether structured help improves participation or creates needless barriers.

MTSS provides a framework for coordinating support, but its relevance to inclusion requires interpretation. Sailor et al. (2018) examine the use of MTSS as a whole-school strategy to inclusive education. The current essay builds on that known connection by addressing how school circumstances should influence provision decisions. It does not claim to introduce the relationship of MTSS and inclusions.

2. Research Question and Objectives

The central research question is: What contextual considerations should guide the use of MTSS to support inclusive education across diverse school settings?

The article has three objectives:

1. To examine how the core components of MTSS relate to the aims of inclusive education.
2. To analyse contextual considerations that may influence the organisation and implementation of tiered support across schools.
3. To synthesise literature-informed considerations for organising and reviewing support, without presenting them as an empirically validated model.

3. Review Approach

3.1 Research Design and Source Materials

This article adopts a conceptual approach informed by a selective narrative review. Its materials comprise peer-reviewed research on MTSS, RTI, PBIS, and inclusive education; scholarly books addressing integrated support and ecological theory; international reports from UNESCO and the OECD; and professional guidance describing MTSS components and implementation. These publications provide the basis for the discussion. No participant data, interviews, questionnaires, or school observations were collected.

Sources were selected for their relevance to the article's three objectives: explaining the relationship between MTSS and inclusion, examining contextual considerations affecting support, and developing implications for organising and reviewing provision. Foundational publications inform the discussion of tiered support and ecological theory, while more recent reports and guidance address implementation and policy context. The selection is purposive rather than exhaustive and does not constitute a systematic review.

3.2 Interpretation and Synthesis

The discussion brings sources together according to their relevance to the research objectives. Historical and conceptual publications inform the account of MTSS development and its relationship with inclusion. Professional guidance explains the framework's components and

recommended arrangements. International reports provide a broader perspective on policy commitments and implementation conditions.

The interpretation considers how these different sources inform the organisation of support, particularly in relation to language and culture, professional capacity, resources, collaboration, and student and family participation. Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective provides a lens for examining relationships between learners and their environments. Its application to MTSS in this article is an interpretive connection rather than evidence that support arrangements produce inclusive outcomes.

Research findings, professional recommendations, policy descriptions, and the article's own implications are distinguished throughout the discussion. The synthesis does not combine statistical results or estimate the effectiveness of MTSS. No formal quality appraisal or independent coding was undertaken. The resulting considerations represent a reasoned interpretation of selected literature and remain open to further examination.

3.3 Organisation and Presentation

The discussion proceeds from the development of MTSS and its academic and behavioural foundations to its core components and three tiers of support. It then examines contextual considerations, applies an ecological perspective, and develops implications for organising inclusive support. The discussion section brings these strands together to address the research objectives and central question.

4. Development of MTSS and Its Academic and Behavioural Foundations

4.1 Origins of MTSS

MTSS arose from the development and integration of preventive approaches to assistance. The notion of universal provision, enhanced targeted aid, and extensive tailored support were all influenced by public health prevention. Horner and Sugai (2015) examine the impact of this preventative rationale on school-wide behavioural support. Tiers in educational applications refer to escalating levels of help rather than permanent learner groupings.

Sailor et al. (2021) identify two key strands: research on constructive behavioural support and research on academic challenges, particularly reading. The behavioural strand contributed to PBIS, and the academic strand contributed to RTI. They cite 2008 as an early milestone in efforts to integrate these approaches and explain Kansas' statewide MTSS strategy. Sugai and Horner (2009) also investigated common principles that link RTI with school-wide positive behaviour support. MTSS evolved as a broader coordinating framework; it did not replace RTI on a single date.

4.2 Response to Intervention and Academic Support

RTI integrates appropriate education, identifying extra needs, and tracking students' responses to support. Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) explain that it was developed as an alternative to relying solely

on differences between intelligence-test scores and achievement for identifying learning difficulties. A key contribution was to link understanding of difficulty with instruction delivery and review.

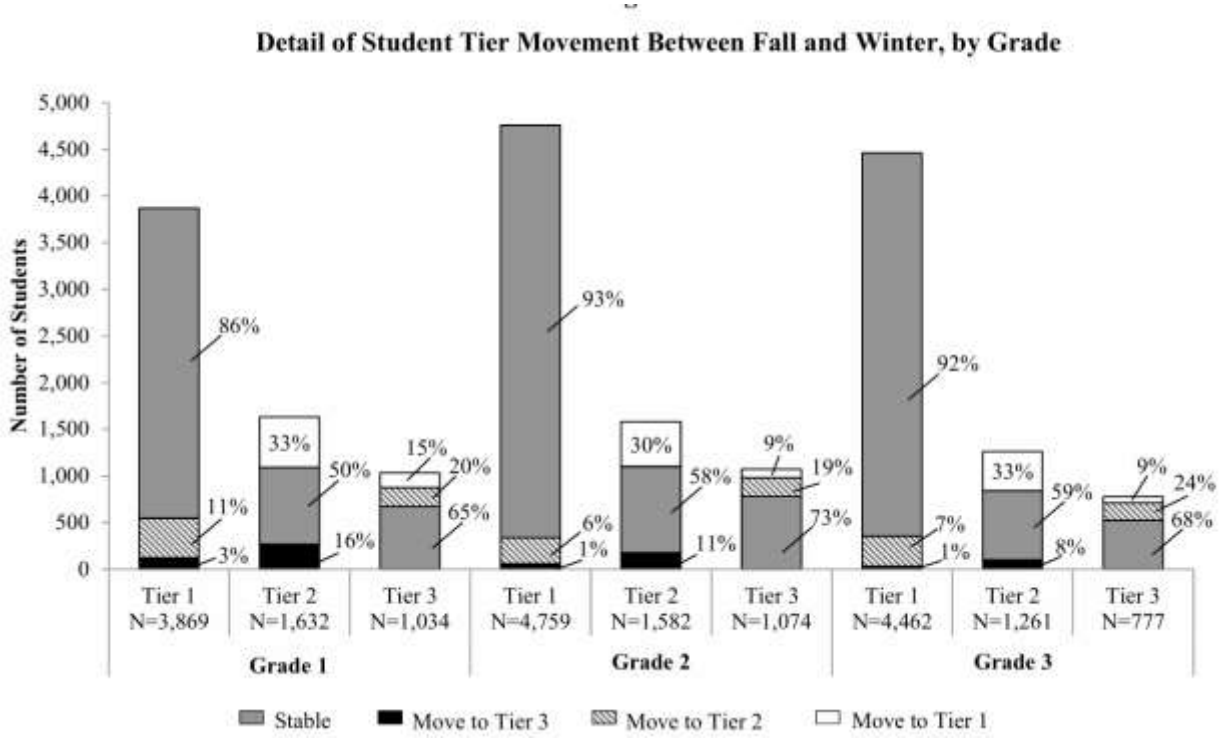

Figure 2: *The Response to Intervention (RtI) Evaluation*

Source: (Balu et al., 2015)

Figure 2 depicts changes in support placement among participating schools. Some students remained in the same tier, while others transitioned between them. This demonstrates changes in provision over time, although movement alone does not result in enhanced reading achievement (Balu et al., 2015). For inclusion, the additional question is whether improving support improves access to learning and engagement.

4.3 Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports

PBIS coordinates preventive behavioural support across the school and provides additional assistance. Horner and Sugai (2015) characterise its emphasis on supportive surroundings, unambiguous expectations, and evidence-based decision-making. Contemporary PBIS also covers social, emotional, and mental health concerns (PBIS, 2026).

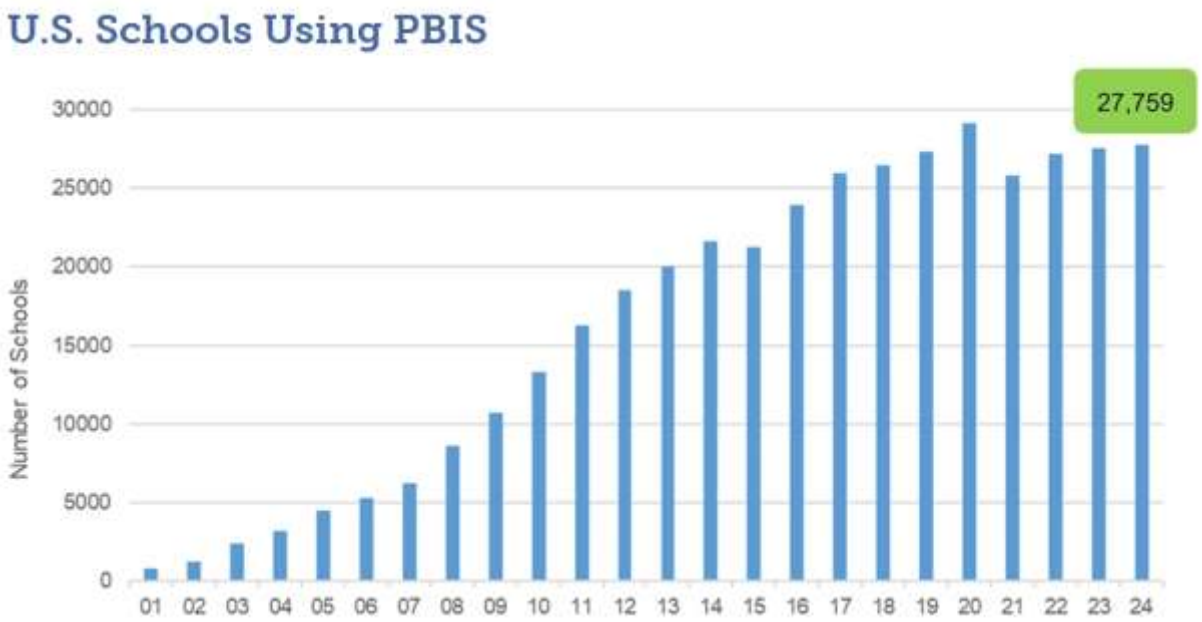

Figure 3: *Number of U.S. Schools Using PBIS, 2001–2024*

Source: (PBIS, 2026)

The graph provided shows that 27,759 schools in the United States will use PBIS in 2024. It demonstrates adoption rather than uniform implementation or success in all schools. Within the current conversation, PBIS draws emphasis to the variables that promote participation. Behavioural support should also be evaluated for cultural responsiveness and meaningful engagement; compliance is not the article's criterion for inclusion.

4.4 Coordinating Academic and Behavioural Support

McIntosh and Goodman (2016) describe the integration of RTI and PBIS using common information, practices, teams, and organisational processes. This collaboration can assist schools in addressing both academic and behavioural issues. For example, a hypothetical learner who avoids written work may require aid with a writing challenge as well as routines for starting projects or seeking help. Staff would need to look into the circumstances rather than assuming one reason for the behaviour. This case highlights the rationale for coordination rather than a demonstrated intervention outcome.

5. Core Components and the Three Tiers of Support



Figure 4: *The MTSS framework*

Source: (AIR, 2026)

Figure 4 depicts the relationship between screening, progress monitoring, and the multi-level preventative system via data-driven decision-making. The surrounding factors emphasise the value of leadership, policy, professional ability, communication, teamwork, and culturally responsive practice. As a result, the graphic ties the support organization to the school conditions addressed later in the text. The three layers, as explained in Table 1, are part of this larger framework.

The Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports emphasises four critical components: screening, progress monitoring, a multilevel preventative system, and data-driven decision-making. These link the identification of potential needs, the review of replies, the organization of service, and choices about changes. This article recognises their importance in MTSS, focusing on coordination rather than assessment design. The tiered component offers universal, targeted, and intensive help (AIR, 2026).

Table 1: *Tiers of support and their interpretation in relation to inclusion*

Tier	Organisation of support	Illustrative connection to inclusion
Tier 1: Universal	School-wide academic and behavioural provision for all learners.	Accessible assistance and supportive relationships establish a foundation for participation.
Tier 2: Targeted	Additional assistance addressing identified needs, commonly in small groups.	Extra support is coordinated with classroom learning and peer participation.
Tier 3: Intensive	More intensive, individualised assistance responding to persistent or substantial needs.	Staff, families, learners, and relevant specialists coordinate assistance while maintaining access and belonging.

The level of support should not determine a learner's identity or belonging. According to the article's inclusive perspective, the objective of each layer is to promote learning and participation. A tier assignment documents an organisational choice; it does not imply that the support is acceptable or that the learner is included.

6. Contextual Factors Shaping MTSS and Inclusion

According to the OECD (2026), key implementation criteria include leadership and coordination, professional capability, data infrastructure, and alignment with inclusive education policy. In this article, contextual adaptation refers to how schools structure and coordinate MTSS in response to learner requirements, staffing, resources, and school circumstances, with a focus on timely support and informed decision-making.

6.1 Language and Cultural Context

The Center for Multi-Tiered System of Supports emphasises culturally and linguistically appropriate methods for multilingual learners (AIR, 2026). When used to support organization, this emphasises communication, linguistic expertise, and knowledge about prior educational experiences. A school may need to involve staff who understand language development or offer families with clear explanations. The goal is to inform support decisions without supposing that linguistic differences always signal a learning problem.

6.2 Professional Capacity, Resources, and Collaboration

Staff expertise, time, leadership, and resources all have an impact on what a school can plan on a consistent basis. Sailor et al. (2021) prioritise preparation for MTSS implementation, whereas the OECD (2026) focuses on system circumstances. The implication here is that support plans should specify roles, available knowledge, and chances for collaboration. When they are insufficient, schools should make the unfulfilled capacity visible and plan changes rather than blaming every problem on the learner.

6.3 Student and Family Participation

UNESCO (2020) stresses inclusiveness via discourse and engagement. This article proposes that students and families collaborate to determine whether support is intelligible, accessible, and useful. Their engagement may disclose issues that staff records do not explain, such as embarrassment over leaving a class or confusion about the goal of a support session. Meaningful participation necessitates opportunities to influence arrangements, rather than simply receiving information after decisions have been taken.

7. An Ecological Perspective on Support Decisions

Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 1996) ecological approach investigates development through the interactions between individuals and their interrelated environments. The article takes that approach to investigate how classroom interactions, family-school communication, organisational

arrangements, and broader cultural contexts can influence support decisions. In practice, it encourages schools to examine both the learner's needs and the conditions that impact whether support is appropriate.

MTSS and the ecological approach offer distinct but complimentary perspectives. MTSS arranges the intensity of support by providing universal, targeted, and intense services. The ecological approach emphasises the relationships and conditions surrounding such service (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). For example, obtaining more intense help does not often fix problems created by inaccessible scheduling, unclear staff duties, or limited connection with families. These circumstances can affect support at any tier, hence ecological systems do not correspond to specific MTSS levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1996).

Consider a Tier 2 student who receives targeted reading support but frequently misses sessions due to scheduling conflicts with a valued school activity. The student feels isolated from his peers, and the family is unsure about the purpose of the additional assistance. An ecological interpretation urges the school to study these issues, in addition to the reading problem. Staff could manage the schedule, define duties, and make plans with the student and family. The school would next assess whether the changed arrangements improved access to support, participation, and reading progress. More intensive support may still be required, but raising intensity alone will not address the scheduling and communication issues.

This example exemplifies the article's solution to the research question: schools can tailor the organization of MTSS to their own circumstances by taking into account learner needs, relationships, resources, and chances for engagement. The tiered framework remains, but the mechanisms for providing help are tailored to local situations. Bronfenbrenner's perspective explains why this emphasis on context is important; it is used here to guide interpretation rather than to demonstrate that MTSS creates certain outcomes.

8. Implications for Organizing Inclusive Support

The preceding explanation raises various issues for schools planning MTSS. UNESCO (2020) promotes addressing barriers to learning and involvement, as well as valuing the value of each learner. The Center on Multi-Tiered System of Supports defines MTSS as a preventive framework based on learners' strengths Source: (AIR, 2026). Drawing on these viewpoints, this article advises that schools take into account learners' experiences, the availability of existing aid, and extra support needs rather than treating a diagnosis or tier assignment as a comprehensive explanation.

Staff responsibilities, professional competence, collaboration time, and resources must all be considered when coordinating activities. McIntosh and Goodman (2016) describe how academic and behavioural support can be combined using shared teams, practices, information, and organisational mechanisms. The OECD (2026) also identifies leadership, coordination, and professional capacity as important implementation factors. These arrangements should take into account student and family participation, in line with UNESCO's (2020) emphasis on conversation

and meaningful involvement. The implication of this essay is that schools should seek their feedback on whether support is intelligible, accessible, and useful.

Schools should also evaluate how more support affects classroom engagement and peer relationships. UNESCO (2020) distinguishes between inclusion and placement alone, but Horner and Sugai (2015) stress the importance of monitoring both the implementation and effects of behavioural assistance. These viewpoints combine to inform the article's proposal that assessments consider whether support was given as planned and whether it improved access, participation, and progress. These factors address the key research question by linking MTSS organization to school contexts and learners' experiences. They are literature-based implications rather than a verified methodology or a set approach for each school.

9. Discussion: Addressing the Research Objectives

9.1 Objective 1: Connecting MTSS Components with Inclusion

The initial purpose is to understand how MTSS components relate to inclusive education. The framework combines need identification, help organization, and response review through screening, progress monitoring, tiered provision, and data-driven decision-making (AIR, 2026) Sailor et al. (2018) examine the use of MTSS as a whole-school strategy to inclusive education. However, this link necessitates consideration of whether support facilitates meaningful learning and engagement, which aligns with UNESCO's (2020) definition of inclusion.

The published numbers show several topics, including policy arrangements (UNESCO, 2020), changes in tier placement (Balu et al., 2015), and PBIS adoption (PBIS, 2026).These describe policy and implementation tendencies rather than determining overall success. This article contends that a school's usage of MTSS should be evaluated beyond the presence of levels and meetings, with a focus on learners' access, involvement, and progress.

9.2 Objective 2: Identifying Contextual Considerations

The second goal is to address the conditions that affect the organization and implementation of support. The OECD (2026) emphasises leadership, coordination, professional capacity, and the infrastructure that facilitates implementation. Guidance for multilingual learners also emphasises culturally and linguistically appropriate activities (AIR,2026). These sources, together with UNESCO's (2020) emphasis on participation and discourse, inform the article's discussion of language, culture, resources, collaborative time, student and family involvement, and the information utilised in support decisions.

The ecological viewpoint of Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1996) helps to comprehend these considerations through the relationships between learners and their settings. When applied to this article, it invites an examination of how classroom experiences, family-school communication, and organisational arrangements affect access to support. This view allows for variations between schools without assuming that the same arrangements are appropriate everywhere. Drawing on

UNESCO's (2020) emphasis on reducing obstacles, the article argues that practicality alone should not justify provisions that limit participation. Priorities for improvement should be identified based on resource limits.

9.3 Objective 3: Developing Reflective Questions

The third purpose is met by the literature-based considerations described in Section 8. These link the inclusive purpose of aid to the conditions required for its implementation and evaluation. McIntosh and Goodman (2016) contribute to the emphasis on coordination across academic and behavioural assistance, while UNESCO (2020) provides a foundation for evaluating access and participation. Horner and Sugai (2015) stress the importance of investigating both support implementation and outcomes.

This article provides a focused synthesis of various views for understanding assistance options in a variety of educational scenarios. It makes no claim to demonstrate a new relationship between MTSS and inclusion, as this has already been investigated in scholarship (Sailor et al., 2018), or to propose an empirically proven model.

Taken together, the discussion addresses the key study issue by advocating that the implementation of MTSS be led by learner needs, the availability of support, relationships with students and families, staff capacity, resources, and regular evaluation. This synthesis implies that help should be arranged in such a way that learners may access and benefit from it while explicitly promoting involvement.

10. Implications, Limitations, and Further Research

Taken together, the discussion addresses the key study issue by advocating that the implementation of MTSS be led by learner needs, the availability of support, relationships with students and families, staff capacity, resources, and regular evaluation. This synthesis implies that help should be arranged in such a way that learners may access and benefit from it while explicitly promoting involvement.

The paper uses a selective literature base and does not include exhaustive searches, formal quality assessment, or independent coding. It does not assess the efficiency of MTSS, compare countries in a systematic manner, or identify improvements in the author's school. Research findings, professional guidance, policy reporting, and theoretical interpretations are all different types of evidence and should not be regarded interchangeably. The illustrations for RTI and PBIS in the United States, in particular, reflect distinct implementation patterns and cannot be used to conclude that identical arrangements or outcomes exist elsewhere. The ecological viewpoint helps to interpret context, but it does not show any causal relationships between support arrangements and inclusion.

Further research might look into how the proposed questions are perceived and applied across school phases, languages, and resource settings. Empirical research could look into whether they

help teams coordinate assistance and whether the ensuing arrangements improve learners' access, involvement, and progress. Such an examination would necessitate a distinct research approach and cannot be extrapolated from the current topic.

11. Conclusion

MTSS provides a framework for organising universal, targeted, and intensive help, but its contribution to inclusive education is contingent on the circumstances under which aid is provided. This article identifies linguistic and cultural context, professional capability, resources, teamwork, student and family participation, and the quality of support decisions as factors that should influence its application in diverse schools.

An ecological viewpoint explains why these characteristics are important: learners receive support through relationships and organisational arrangements, not just tier labels. The core premise is that schools should tailor MTSS to their own needs while retaining access, engagement, and progress as inclusive goals. The proposed reflective questions link that goal to decisions concerning delivery and review. As a conceptual contribution, the essay provides a foundation for professional discussion and additional inquiry, rather than evidence of success or a verified implementation methodology.

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