# INTERNATIONAL LITERACY ASSOCIATION

# Right to Integrated Support Systems

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**Children have the right to integrated support systems:** Student learning depends on the successful alignment of a complex system of stakeholders working cooperatively to strengthen teaching and learning practices and knowledge-building frameworks. Integrated support systems must be inclusive of students, classroom teachers, reading/literacy specialists, school staff, school leaders, families and caregivers, volunteers, and community members. Researchers, policymakers, and global partners play key roles as well. Learning occurs as a result of overlapping, multifaceted spheres of influence, and when this complexity of education systems is recognized, there is a stronger likelihood that all stakeholders will work as partners toward the same, collective goal.

*—Children's Rights to Excellent Literacy Instruction*

*Forging strong connections and fostering productive collaborations...are essential to creating a high-quality integrated system of support.*

There's no one-size-fits-all formula for student support systems, but the relationships between the various stakeholders—everyone from classroom teachers and school librarians to families and community members—directly impact on success. So although recognizing *who* plays a part in these systems is important, we also need to focus on *how* they work together.

Forging strong connections and fostering productive collaborations through learning ecologies, dialogic relationships and teaching, and professional learning communities (PLCs) are all essential to creating a high-quality integrated system of support.

## Learning Ecologies

Researchers such as Bronfenbrenner (2005), Reinking and Bradley (2011), and Zhao and Frank (2003) have used the metaphor of the learning ecology to describe the evolving, multilevel, dynamic, transactional interplay and interdependency between multiple actors and multiple variables operating within schools or educational settings. We use the term *integration* to indicate the need for productive connections between these elements.

A school learning ecology involves the curriculum, the teaching pedagogies, and the relationship between not only students and teachers but also students and their peers in a social learning environment. It also involves the relationships and social capital of class teachers in their relationships with their colleagues, with school administrators, and with families and caregivers within a wider school and social and political community (Ell, Simpson, Mayer, Davies, Clinton, & Dawson, 2019).

Finally, it involves the infrastructure, the physical setting, and the availability of resources, including technologies.

Learning is orchestrated through the development of culturally appropriate, multimodal literacies. As children are immersed in the literacy practices of their community and school, all of these elements provide support to learners in one way or another.

We adopt the meaning of the right to integrated support systems to refer to a broad, sociological concept. As the right to integrated support systems includes contextualized, localized, and community-based services, we deliberately dissociate it from the initialism RTI (Response to Intervention). The principles of RTI are valuable as they are premised on educators who make quality interventions on a needs basis to make a difference in student learning.

However, the strict model of RTI as a multitiered approach controlled by screening is too narrow a frame to include more adaptive and site-specific support and the involvement of those outside the frame of formal learning. We believe children have the right to be provided with a suite of systems that are productively aligned whether they are accessed at school, in a library or any other kind of education center, or at home.

*Children have the right to be provided with a suite of systems that are productively aligned.*

Child psychologists and social researchers recognize that school, community, and family play important roles in how children develop. However, these impacts change when considering the birth-to-school continuum, or birth-to-adolescent development of learners. As children begin to receive formal schooling, family has a lesser impact, whereas peer and community contexts begin to play a role.

For example, a strong family influence is often seen in the early years from birth, with an increasing school influence when children attend a daycare, preschool, or kindergarten. Peer groups and community begin to have a stronger impact on children in the primary years, a gap that is often ever-widening through the upper grades (Scully, Stites, Roberts-King, & Barbour, 2018). If consistent and positive messages of support indicate that the school, community, and family are working together to achieve similar outcomes, the sky becomes the limit for growing learners. To broaden learning perspectives, partnerships with researchers at colleges and universities, along with outreach to families, caregivers, and communities, are crucial.

# Dialogic Relationships and Teaching

*Dialogue is essential in the consideration of literacy practices, as inclusive interaction is crucial to both learning and teaching.*

Dialogue is essential in the consideration of literacy practices, as inclusive interaction is crucial to both learning and teaching. The word *dialogue* implies two-way conversation, a space in which respectful discussion takes place. The concept of dialogic teaching was theorized by Robin Alexander who studied children learning in classrooms around the world (Alexander, 2001). He noted that learning was successful in environments that "harness the power of talk to engage children, stimulate and extend their thinking, and advance their learning and understanding" (Alexander, 2004, p. 37). Alexander's dialogic principles are as follows:

- *Collective*: Educators and learners address learning tasks together, whether as a group or as a class.
- *Reciprocal*: Educators and learners listen to each other, share ideas, and consider alternative viewpoints.
- *Supportive*: Learners articulate their ideas freely, without fear of embarrassment over wrong answers.
- *Cumulative*: Educators and learners build on their own and others' ideas and chain them into coherent lines of thinking and enquiry.
- *Purposeful*: The dialogue is planned and transacted with specific learning outcomes clearly in view. (Alexander, 2004, p. 38)

Research into the use of dialogue has expanded into many different contexts and each one upholds the power of dialogue as a catalyst for learning. In addition, researchers have demonstrated that through dialogic teaching, students make improvements in learning outcomes. Dialogic teaching is particularly geared toward addressing underachievement in high-poverty school districts, revealing that the deliberate use of a broad repertoire of collaborative talk patterns leads to increases in literacy achievement for all students across different curriculum areas (Alexander, 2017; Simpson, 2016).

## Building Shared Understanding of Literacies Through PLCs

Access to comprehensive databases with summative and formative data demonstrating students' proficiencies in reading and writing, as well as identified areas of needed improvement, is available to those supporting the literacy development of our learners. Schools committed to fostering PLCs will use these data to drive efforts around professional development while informing strategic planning processes that address instructional programs.

Communities of practice create opportunities for individuals to work with others to do the following:

- Interact socially to co-construct understandings around literacy best practices
- Grow from new conceptualized understandings
- Observe instruction in model classrooms
- Self-direct and choose next steps for continuous improvement (Tracey & Morrow, 2017)

When these components are ingrained in the culture of a school, literacy stakeholders, including families and caregivers, can engage in worthwhile conversations aimed at creating a shared understanding as to how they can work together to improve literacy teaching and learning and, therefore, impact student achievement.

Well-developed PLCs realize this mission because of a focus on developing educators' knowledge of literacy practices: "Through collaborative inquiry, teachers explore new ideas, current practice, and evidence of student learning using practices that respect them as the experts on what is needed to improve their own practice and increase student learning" (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008, p. 89).

## Working Together for a Better Future

Our children deserve nothing less than a high-quality integrated school experience where support systems work together to focus on increasing students' academic, social, personal, and emotional well-being. School communities must focus on enhancing their learning ecology, taking a pulse of what supports are working well and creating actions to improve those in need of improvement.

*School communities must focus on enhancing their learning ecology.*

This research brief expands on the second of four tenets that compose the International Literacy Association's *Children's Rights to Excellent Literacy Instruction* position statement: **rightstoread.org/statement**

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