

**General Education Teachers' Viewpoints Concerning Response to Intervention**

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THESIS

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## **DEDICATION**

On September 3, 1976, I stepped on a foot. Little did I know that stepping on that foot would lead to an introduction to my favorite people. For you see, that foot belongs to Dennis Martin Ryan, who has not only the face of an Irishman, but also the heart and soul. We married and were blessed with the daughters and sons we could imagine only in our dreams.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

IDEA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IDEIA	Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act
IQ	Intelligence Quotient
LBS1	Learning Behavior Specialist 1
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
RTI	Response to Intervention
STEEP	System to Enhance Educational Performance

## **SUMMARY**

The introduction of Response to Intervention (RTI), an initiative that provides multitier interventions to address the needs of struggling students, redefines the role of the general education teacher. Research on the general education initiative is lacking in a number of areas, including the viewpoints of the general education teacher. This study adds to the existing literature base on RTI as it explores the perspectives of classroom teachers.

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to examine the viewpoints of general education teachers as they implement RTI. Through one-on-one interviews, this study probed the knowledge and perceptions of general education teachers. The participants included second and third grade general education teachers of a school district in a suburb of a large Midwestern city. Through interviews, the teachers discussed their perspectives of RTI in their classrooms.

Using a social constructivist paradigm and an interpretive lens, this study was designed to uncover the reality of the complex view of the participants. Ten themes emerged from the data. The first two themes grew from the participants' discussions of their knowledge of RTI. These themes addressed how the teachers explained RTI and how they described the purpose of RTI. The next eight themes grew from the participants' discussions of their perceptions of RTI. Four themes addressed the impact of RTI on the teachers. These themes spoke to the teachers' observations of the professional development they received, available resources, establishment of interventions, and the emotional toll on the teachers. The next four themes spoke to the impact on the students. These themes included the students' reactions to receiving interventions, the impact of data collection on the teaching of reading, teacher observations of students as data collection, and the timeline of the RTI process. Additionally, individual participants provided interesting and unique perceptions worth noting.



## **SUMMARY (continued)**

Two central categories surfaced from the data. The central categories summed up the foundation and motivation of the teachers and connected the themes. Driven by the themes, the categories identified the heart of the research. The central categories spoke to the intent of the teachers to attend to the needs of the individual student and the reliance teachers have on each other. The central categories illuminate the comments of the participants.

A more thorough understanding of the viewpoints of the general education teacher has implications for school reform. As this study contributes to the pool of research, additional studies will provide additional insight.

## **Chapter I**

### **RATIONALE AND RESEARCH**

Throughout the history of education in the United States, the role of the general education teacher has evolved. From the one-room schoolhouse to the technologically advanced classrooms of today, the classroom teacher has assumed expanded responsibilities. Recent legislation has called for further examination of the general education teacher position. With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, schools are held to stricter measures of annual yearly progress. Additionally, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) in 2004 includes authorization for states to allow determination of special education eligibility based on a student's response to scientific, research-based interventions (IDEIA, 2004). These current legislations paved the way for the introduction of Response to Intervention (RTI), resulting in a redefinition of the position of the general education teacher.

Researchers have described RTI as a general education initiative that provides multitier interventions that are research-based, rigorously implemented with fidelity for a prescribed time period, closely monitored using data-based decision processes, and designed to provide appropriate learning experiences for all students (e. g., Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2005; Glover, DiPerna, & Vaughn, 2007; Shapiro & Clemens, 2009). As a student demonstrates need, graduated intensive interventions are provided through a system of tiers. The progress of the student is monitored regularly to determine the level of response the student is demonstrating. Schools have the option of determining the number of tiers provided with the option of the final tier resulting in special education assessment and determination of eligibility.

Barnes and Harlacher (2008) identified two purposes of RTI, i.e., identification of a learning disability and provision of improved academic outcomes for all students. They named five supporting principles: 1) proactive and preventive approach to education; 2) assurance of an instructional match between student skills, curriculum, and instruction; 3) problem-solving orientation and data-based decision making; 4) use of effective practices; and 5) systems-level approach. Principle one refers to provision of adequate instruction before deficits appear in a student's skills. The second principle ensures that there is knowledge of the student's skill level, and the appropriate curriculum and instruction are provided; struggling students are offered additional instruction to meet their needs. Principle three refers to a heuristic model and the ensuing identification of student struggles, implementation of interventions, and evaluation of progress. This principle defines the difference between the current performance of the student and the expected performance level, and is not focused on the learning characteristics of the student, but rather the classroom experience. The fourth principal addresses evidence-based and data-driven instruction, with ongoing progress monitoring. Principle five discusses the application of RTI to an entire school, not to a single classroom or a single student. As these supporting principles identify, the focus is on environmental variables which can be managed within the classroom, and as such, the primary responsibility for implementation of RTI falls on the general education teacher.

Although professional development was not included as a key principle, Barnes and Harlacher (2008) considered ongoing professional development as a vital piece in addressing the importance of the general education teacher's understanding of the rationale behind RTI. The researchers identified key components of successful professional development. These components include addressing the beliefs and attitudes of classroom teachers, their knowledge

of the relationship between assessment and instruction, and their skills in collection and analysis of data.

### **Problem Statement**

While current research exists in a variety of areas of RTI, the focus is fairly limited (Kratchowill, Volpiansky, Clements, & Ball, 2007). Studies have been conducted on RTI and how it pertains to the problem-solving model (Carney & Steifel, 2008), professional development (Shapiro & Clemens, 2009), early intervention (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2008), the discrepancy model (Case, Speece, & Molloy, 2003), special education placement (O'Connor, Harty, & Fulmer, 2005a), and specific interventions (Dexter, Hughes, & Farmer, 2008). Research addressing the changing roles of school personnel has focused on the role of the school psychologist (Macheck & Nelson, 2007), and principal and special education teacher (Lau, Seiler, Muyskens, Canter, Vankeuren, & Marston, 2006). Research on the general education teacher has addressed the issues of instructional models (Case et al., 2003), implementation of interventions (Glover et al., 2007); the referral process (Dunn, Cole, & Estrada, 2009) and administrative support (Lau et al., 2006).

Lacking in the research is the viewpoint of the general education teacher as the insider with a unique perspective. Macheck and Nelson (2007), in a survey of the role of the school psychologist in the identification of a reading disability, discussed the importance of identifying the attitudes and perceptions of all workers in the school setting. The research, however, is scant in addressing the observations and insights of the primary implementers of RTI and those with a unique insider's perspective, the classroom teachers.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the unique perspective of the general education teacher. As the primary implementers of RTI and with an insider's view of an initiative still in its infancy, the general education teacher has an outlook unlike others' views. Many factors are required to successfully introduce a new initiative in a school (Fullan, 2007) and the role of the general education teacher is heavily impacted.

As RTI enters our school systems, the importance of this study is the depth of information it will add to the research pool. Unlike other studies that have focused on the frequency and intensity of interventions (Harn, Linan-Thompson, & Roberts, 2008), specific reading (Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003) and mathematics interventions (Bryant, Bryant, Gersten, Scammacca, & Chavez, 2008), early interventions (O'Connor et al., 2005a), and fidelity of implementation of interventions (Glover & DiPerna, 2007), this study focused specifically on the perspective of the general education teacher. The study probed what teachers observed and experienced. As a new initiative, the unknowns of RTI are greater than the knowns. Information gathered from general education teachers provided a perspective as yet unearthed.

## **Study Design**

Drawing on qualitative research, and using a social constructivist paradigm, I conducted a descriptive case study, conducted through an interpretive lens, of the phenomenon of RTI as experienced by the general education teacher. Interviewing classroom teachers as they implement RTI disclosed the untapped viewpoints of the true insiders of RTI.

Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach and Richardson (2005) defined qualitative research as "a systematic approach to understanding qualities, or the essential nature, of a

phenomenon within a particular context” (p. 195). True to this definition, my study aimed to deepen the knowledge and awareness of the RTI experience of general education teachers in one school district. The particular context was the perspective of the general education teacher. Cresswell (2007) described qualitative research as a form of interpretive inquiry which allows the researcher to interpret the data. Through the interpretive lens, I considered the construct of each participant as equally valid. Through the process of interviewing, the perspectives and behaviors of the participants determined the heart of the research. The depth of description provided through qualitative research allows the reader an opportunity to feel what is happening in the general education teacher’s professional life.

A descriptive case study was the chosen method as it provided insight and discovery that led to interpretation. Merriam (1998) described a case study as particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic. The particularistic characteristics described a focus on a specific phenomenon. Descriptive characteristics lent themselves to rich, thick descriptions of a specific phenomenon. These descriptions included the intricacies of the phenomenon by presenting viewpoints from a new perspective. Heuristic characteristics expanded understanding of a phenomenon. As groundbreaking implementers of a new program, classroom teachers, through interviews, provided a perspective that will expand the current understanding of the phenomenon of RTI.

As a bounded system (Cresswell, 2007; Merriam, 1998), a case study is a single entity with purposefully defined boundaries. Examples of a case include a program, a student, or a school, that might represent a topical issue or be an illustration of concern. In this case study the case was RTI, and the boundaries were second and third grade general education teachers implementing RTI in a suburban school district for no fewer than three years. With the specific focus on this limited group, the boundaries are clear and the participants unambiguous.

According to Cresswell (2007) social constructivism is a worldview which allows participants to gain a greater understanding of their work. Research conducted with this paradigm sets the goal of searching for the complex view of the participants. There was no pre-determined theory, but rather the expectation of developing a pattern of meaning. Open-ended questions were used when interviewing participants to address the process of implementation. The researcher then interpreted the information to make sense of the meaning of the participant. Schram (2006) discussed the role of the researcher as constructing the reality of the participants.

Participants were selected with purpose: second and third grade teachers with at least three years of experience in the district. Although 15 participants initially agreed to partake in the study, one participant dropped out. Fourteen participants participated in face-to-face interviews, and eleven participants participated in follow-up phone interviews. After the two sets of interviews, the saturation point was reached. Rubin and Rubin (1995) described the saturation point as the point at which no new information emerges.

The processes of writing a case study, which included interviewing, analyzing, and the actual writing, did not stand alone as distinct phases in a process; the three steps were intermingled. Throughout the process of data collection, a narrative was formed. The story unfolded as the participants provided details, and layers of the narrative were constructed. I identified codes and themes that included both the expected and unexpected. Finally, I wrote a realistic and accurate narrative reflecting the experiences of the general education teachers (Cresswell, 2007).

### **Research Question**

This study was conducted to determine the viewpoints of general education teachers as they implement RTI. Research questions focused on the knowledge and perceptions of the

classroom teachers. Knowledge is defined not only as an understanding of the RTI process, but also the reason RTI exists. For the purpose of this study, perception is defined as an awareness of the classroom environment and the realization of the impact of the initiative, as well as self-perceptions of practical uses of data collection and analysis skills. Through the discussions of knowledge and perception, the classroom teachers incorporated a discussion of their attitude, which included the feelings and opinions they developed regarding their role in the implementation of RTI.

Research Question: What are the viewpoints of the general education teachers as they implement RTI?

- a. What are the general education teachers' knowledge of the RTI process and the purpose for implementing RTI?
- b. What are the general education teachers' perceptions of the impact of RTI on students and teachers? What are the general education teachers' perceptions of their own skills and abilities to collect and analyze data for determining instruction?

## **Conclusion**

As RTI exists in our classrooms today, the general education teacher is critical for implementation. The more we learn about the viewpoints of the classroom teacher, the more we will understand the impact of the initiative. As RTI is still in its infancy, qualitative research will identify previously unaddressed issues in the field. Providing an opportunity for general education teachers to discuss their view of their role in the RTI process will make available a new window into RTI research.



## **Chapter II**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In the course of conducting research, it is important to identify the issues, topics, and themes that exist in the research literature (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995). It is important to identify not only the fields of inquiry that have been addressed, but also the gaps. The proposed study of the general education teachers' viewpoints on RTI requires two separate reviews of literature: RTI and introducing an initiative to a school.

#### **Background**

In 1977, the United States Office of Education established the special education category of learning disabilities. Specific decisive factors were required for a student to be found eligible in this category. Criteria included failure to benefit from adequate instruction, severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability, exclusion of sensory impairments, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or economic disadvantage (United States Office of Education, 1977). Since that time, the number of students identified with learning disabilities has increased more than 200% (Vaughn et al., 2003). In the period from 1979 to 1998 the number of students identified as having a learning disability, more than doubled from 1.2 million to 2.8 million, and of all students identified in special education, more than half are classified as learning disabled (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). While the percentage of identified students has increased dramatically, the process of identification, until recently, has remained the same.

The federal definition of learning disabilities includes the four components of discrepancy, heterogeneity, exclusion, and constitutional factors intrinsic to the student (United States Office of Education, 1977). Discrepancy is generally accepted as the presence of a difference between aptitude and achievement, which manifests as a severe discrepancy between

IQ scores and corresponding achievement test scores. The various disorders of reading, math, written expression, and language make up the heterogeneity component. Exclusion refers to the acknowledgment that no sensory disorder, mental deficiency, emotional disturbance, economic disadvantage, or inadequate instruction is the primary cause of the learning difficulty. The first three components provide the groundwork for the fourth component. Constitutional factors lie at the base of a learning disability. Present the first three components, the presumption is that a neurobiological factor must exist (Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly & Vaughn, 2004). In short, the disability must be based on factors within the student.

According to the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (2005), inadequacies with the abilities/achievement discrepancy criterion have been long-standing. As each state individually determined how to define the discrepancy to determine eligibility for learning disability, the category remained poorly operationalized (Bradley et al., 2005). Criticisms of the discrepancy method include references to a "wait to fail" model, lack of practical knowledge acquired from intelligence tests, and insufficient instructional data about struggling readers who do have intelligence/achievement discrepancies and those who do not have intelligence/achievement discrepancies (Machek & Nelson, 2007). A student may have to wait until entering middle school before the discrepancy is severe enough to warrant eligibility (Bradley et al., 2005). The "wait to fail" model describes a situation in which students fall far behind their classmates before meeting the criteria for the discrepancy component. The academic failure these students endure is seen as problematic (Lau et al., 2006).

Controversy over the IQ/achievement discrepancy continues as researchers consider the lack of empirical evidence and question the reliability of information gathered through the discrepancy component, inability of useful information to guide instruction, and the necessity of

an IQ test to identify a learning disability in a student (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). Fletcher, Denton, and Francis (2005) identified weak connections between at-risk students with IQ/achievement discrepancy and at-risk students with no discrepancy. At the core of the controversy is the belief that the IQ/achievement discrepancy has been responsible for the overidentification of students with learning disabilities (Vaughn et al., 2003). As the debate continues, policy has been introduced to offer an alternative method of assessments that will guide not only appropriate identification, but also instructional improvements for students with learning disabilities (Speece, Case & Molloy, 2003). Also, psychometric problems in IQ tests, and issues of cultural fairness in IQ tests may lead to overrepresentation of SLD students.

### **Response to Intervention**

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 allows school districts to begin the process of redesigning identification methods for students with learning disabilities by authorizing districts to determine special education placement for specific learning disability based on the student's response to scientific research-based instruction and intervention. This identification process is referred to as response to intervention (RTI). The definition of RTI can be stated simply as high quality instruction and remedial services provided to at-risk students with continuous monitoring of their progress. A student who shows insufficient response may be regarded as eligible for special education under the category of learning disabilities (Bradley et al., 2005). The core concepts of RTI include high-quality research-based instruction and behavioral supports provided in general education; scientific research-based interventions; collaboration among school staff to develop, implement, and monitor interventions; documentation and continuous monitoring of student performance; parent involvement; and ongoing assessments that the interventions are implemented with fidelity

(National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005). Glover et al. (2007) added multitier implementation, student assessment and decision-making, evidence-based intervention provision, maintenance of procedural integrity, and development and sustainability of systems level capacity. Mellard, Deshler, and Barth (2004) echoed that the combination of high quality instruction and ongoing progress monitoring are at the basis of RTI. The student's response to the implementation of the interventions determines future decisions regarding provision of services (Bradley et al., 2005). Sugai and Horner (2009) stated that while the initial purpose of RTI included a focus on identifying and attending to the needs of students with learning disabilities, it has expanded to include improved instructional decision-making for all students.

Tiers of intervention exist in a variety of models, but the most commonly recommended model is the three tier model (Carney & Stiefel, 2008). When implemented with fidelity in each tier, the intervention is expected to contain more intense instructional components than the student received in the previous tier. As the student progresses from tier to tier, the intervention may become more intense, the number of sessions may increase, and the group size may be reduced (Daly, Martens, Barnett, Witt, & Olson, 2007). Tier 1 consists of instruction provided in the general education classroom following universal screening for academic and behavioral skills; teaching strategies supported by research; progress monitoring, which includes curriculum-based assessments and determines differentiated instruction. Progress monitoring compares a student's expected rate of learning with his actual rate of learning. This allows the teachers to determine the success of the interventions and alter instruction accordingly (Hughes & Dexter, 2011). Students who do not respond at expected levels of tier 1 interventions move on to tier 2. Typically, tier 2 interventions involve small group, or one-to-one tutoring provided by special education teachers, Title I teachers, and remedial teachers, in addition to the general

education instruction (Marston, Muyskens, Lau, and Canter, 2003). The goal is for the student to receive more specialized prevention for remediation through a process of collaborative problem-solving to determine the instructional supports the student needs. These supports may come in the form of a standard protocol specifically designed for the specific student. The effectiveness of the intervention is determined through regular progress monitoring, with modifications made as necessary. The fidelity or integrity of the provision of the interventions is assessed regularly. Parents are notified regularly of the child's progress through the tier 2 interventions. Support is offered to general education teachers in the form of training and consultation services from available personnel, including school psychologists, special education resource teachers, reading specialists, and administrators. Students considered nonresponsive with tier 2 interventions then move on to tier 3. Tier 3 interventions can be considered special education instruction. At this point a comprehensive evaluation may be conducted to determine eligibility for special education. A comprehensive evaluation is completed, with parent consent, to determine the presence of the disability and the need for special education services. A variety of sources are used to conduct the evaluation, including data from standardized and norm-referenced measures; observations from school staff and parents; as well as all data collected in previous tiers (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005).

While there is no universally accepted model of RTI, the three tier model is most commonly followed in districts (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005). With the provision of quality instruction, the assumption is that a student without a disability will exhibit satisfactory progress. A student who demonstrates insufficient progress may be considered at risk for a learning disability.

### **Strengths of Response to Intervention**

Unlike the IQ achievement discrepancy model, response to intervention models operate under the notion that the difficulty a student may be having could lie in the instruction, within the child himself, or possibly both. By addressing general education instruction, the context in which the learning occurs is considered separate from the basic ability of the child. This does not rule out the part a specific neurological deficit may play, but rather determines if the child can respond to specific classroom interventions (Speece et al., 2003). RTI is provided to students requiring attention within the realm of the general education classroom. To this end, it provides the opportunity to evaluate and address the needs of all students (Shapiro & Clemens, 2009). Additionally, RTI offers the promise of earlier identification using a problem-solving approach, reducing the number of referrals to special education, reducing minority student over-identification, and providing data to enrich the instruction in the general education classroom (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005).

A component of RTI is universal screening to identify students for school failure. Universal screening measures, usually conducted three times a year in the fall, winter, and spring, consist of brief assessments of target skills. While universal screening is currently associated with the area of reading, measures do exist for writing, math and behavior (Hughes & Dexter, 2011). Ideally, data from this screening are used to determine the research-based instruction provided to at-risk students. Universal screening allows for early detection and intervention to determine the need for special education services. The lack of an adequate response to research-based interventions should add confidence to the referral decision that will determine if a student's deficits are based in an underlying disability, and not based on the adequacy of instruction (Schapiro & Clemens, 2009). The data generated by the screening

process may provide critical information that the general education teacher can use to provide interventions in a timely and effective manner (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005).

With frequency of measurements and attention paid to instructional contexts, proponents of RTI suggest that RTI allows for ongoing assessments and avoids a learning disability determination based on the skill level of the student at a single point in time. With traditional identification methods, the focus was on intrinsic causes and did not consider contextual factors (Case et al., 2003). Viewing a learning disability as a deficit within a child may make an assumption about the underlying cause of the learning difficulty. By addressing the quality of instruction within the general education classroom and how the child responds to that instruction, additional information for future decisions may be available (Speece et al., 2003).

According to several researchers (e.g. Shinn, 2007; Shapiro & Clemens, 2009; Fletcher, et al., 2004) using research-based instruction with formative assessment can result in improved reading performance. Intensifying instruction as needed has been proven to not only alter reading performance but also prevent future reading difficulties. Early identification is a key factor in providing this intensive instruction. The quantity and quality of instruction must meet the needs of the individual student with reading difficulties. Maintenance of reading proficiency can be achieved (Shinn, 2007).

A specific concern of the IQ/ achievement discrepancy is the number of student referrals for special education evaluation. A successful RTI model may reduce the number of referrals (Shapiro & Clemens, 2009; Bradley et al., 2005; Case et al., 2003). Hence, one of the purposes of the RTI model itself can be as a prereferral system. With continuous progress monitoring, referral bias may be reduced, or even eliminated, and may also address the problem of false

negatives. Individual classroom performance is compared to other classrooms and could indicate that classroom level intervention may be required prior to any eligibility identification (Case et al., 2003).

Supporters of RTI believe that the structured, evidence-based, problem-solving, progress monitoring components of RTI may produce valid outcome measures, and that successful RTI will be a workable model for special education decisions. The fact that this takes place in the general education classroom has been described as a bonus (Bradley et al., 2005).

### **Challenges of Response to Intervention**

One of the first tests of RTI is to identify its primary focus. Is this general education initiative a method for identifying a learning disability in a student, or an effort at remediation of a student's academic struggles? It is possible for a child to make exceptional progress in an RTI model without reaching the benchmark criterion. If the benchmark criterion is the determining criteria for designating a disability, the child's academic growth is not considered. Progress would be considered unresponsive and therefore a disability would be deemed present (Fuchs, 2003). The lack of clarity in the policy may lead to nebulous implementation across states, districts, and schools.

As RTI implementation is beginning in school districts across the country, the impact it will have on student progress is unknown (Shapiro & Clemens, 2009). Aggregating data across districts may be difficult because the RTI policy is written in such a way as to offer ambiguity in its implementation. The federal legislation has deemed that the assessment process will include multitier interventions. However the interpretation of how to operationalize the intent of the federal legislation is left to school district personnel and researchers (Carney & Stiefel, 2008).



The role of the general education teacher expands in the RTI model. With the use of scientifically based research practices classroom teachers are asked to provide intensive academic and behavioral supports to students. The process involves identifying the area of weakness, selecting the appropriate intervention or interventions, and documenting the results. The professional development required for school district personnel to complete these tasks is an unresolved issue. As researchers have not yet fully addressed the day to day workings of RTI, the expectations for classroom teachers are very high and may be considered unreasonable (Harn et al., 2008). When a student does not respond to the interventions provided, the assumption is that a more intensive intervention is required. Classroom teachers may then ask how to define that intensity - with time, precision of instruction, smaller group size, additional interventions, or a combination of all of these (Carney & Stiefel, 2008). Resources must be made available to all school district personnel to adequately implement RTI. These resources may include schedule adjustments, consideration of space and materials, instruction with documentation as well as redefinition of personnel roles (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005).

Although students who are struggling may respond to small-group instruction, they may respond for differing reasons. A student with a learning disability may benefit from an appropriate intervention, while the student with an attention disorder may respond positively to the smaller size of the group and increased teacher attention. As the students are reconnected with the larger group, the student with attention problems may continue to exhibit struggles with reading (Semrud-Clikeman, 2005). Suppositions about the presence of a learning disability based on student response may be misguided.

While the decrease of special education referrals can be viewed positively, Fuchs (2003) warned that factors based on political and administrative interests may influence the number of

referrals. These influences may not truly represent student progress. Also, students who would appropriately be defined as underachievers and who do not respond to the interventions risk being identified with a learning disability. In the same vein, students with natural high ability would not show evidence of qualifying for special education eligibility (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005).

In the process of monitoring student progress, a 6 to 12 week time frame is generally used for setting goals. Gathering data to drive decision-making in this short time span can reduce the reliability of placement decisions (Shinn, 2007).

Additional concerns include district to district criteria for movement from tier 1 to tier 2, and from tier 2 to tier 3; the use of fidelity in implementing the interventions; and the balance of rigidity and flexibility (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005). Vaughn et al. (2003) ask specific questions in identifying potential problems with RTI. These questions address the validity of the intervention measures, the environmental impact in the identification of a learning disability, the definition of instruction, the training of the personnel, and specifically, if RTI is truly the endpoint in the identification process.

Numerous decisions must be made at the district level as well as the individual classroom level. These decisions include the main focus of RTI, interpretation of the intent of RTI, professional development of school staff, role of the general education teacher, resources available for implementation, referral and placement decisions, standardization of tiers, and fidelity measures. Lack of precision in the description of RTI may lead to uncertainty and lack of confidence at all levels of the process.

### **Limited Research**

While current federal policy authorizes the implementation of RTI in school districts, there is limited research supporting the practices that are recommended. Multitiered approaches have proven effective as a prevention model in school districts; however empirical research on RTI is lacking (Kratchowill et al., 2007). Many studies single out one element of the RTI model, such as a screening tool, a problem-solving model, or professional development, as opposed to studying the wide variety of components that make up the RTI process. While the limited research is valuable, it is necessary to view the entire RTI model as it appears in our school districts (Dexter et al., 2008).

Key issues to address in research include appropriate measures of responsiveness, screening measures, student outcome measures, standardization and assessment, and absolute criteria for determining responsiveness to intervention (Kratchowill et al., 2007). Researchers have studied curriculum-based approaches to assessment and progress monitoring, and documented the positive results of these approaches; RTI does not have supporting research as a method to identify a student with a learning disability (Vaughn et al., 2003). Studies that have been completed focused on district/state implemented interventions versus researcher implemented interventions, problem-solving teams versus standard protocol, and early reading skills for elementary level students (Dexter et al., 2008).

Research on instructional programs to address reading difficulties has documented the significant improvements for struggling students when they are identified at an early age (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005; Harn et al., 2008). However, this research does not generalize to RTI (Kratchowill et al., 2007).

Mellard et al. (2004) questioned if any new identification method for identifying a learning disability will be effective. This is based on their findings that eligibility decisions have less to do with federal and state regulations and more to do with local efforts and problem-solving. They go on to say that any new initiative must take into account the rules and opinions of all stakeholders who are impacted with the implementation of a new method or strategy.

So the question is: Does the research support the policy of RTI implementation in our classrooms, or has policy outdistanced the research?

### **Response to Intervention versus Discrepancy Model**

A number of studies were conducted to compare the RTI model to the discrepancy model in determining the presence of a learning disability in a student. In a three-year study examining an RTI model and its validity in identifying special education eligibility, Case et al., (2003) identified three areas of weakness with the discrepancy model. The researchers collected background information about the participating students and parents; administered achievement, phonological processing, and intelligence tests; collected information from the classroom teachers regarding student social behaviors; and reviewed data about the services each student received over the course of the year. Additionally, the researchers conducted interviews of participating teachers, as well as announced and unannounced fidelity check observations. The first area of weakness had to do with the delay of provision of services while waiting for the discrepancy to reach the cutoff point. The second area was with the inability to find meaningful differences between those students who manifest discrepancies in reading achievement with those students who are non-discrepant poor readers. The final area was the inability to ascertain instructional recommendations from intelligence tests.

Lau et al. (2006) conducted a case study of a student enrolled in the Minneapolis Public School System, which uses a problem-solving model designed to provide the opportunity for students to respond to interventions. The problem-solving model emphasized classroom interventions, databased decision-making, goal setting, and functional evaluation procedures, set in place by a data-driven process resulting from collaborative efforts. They found that IQ tests were insignificant in providing instructional information about students. The problem-solving approach used in Minneapolis Public School system looked for a connection between assessment and intervention. This component was missing with the use of IQ tests. Another finding was the bias that appeared when standardized IQ tests were used with poor and minority students, which led to a disproportionate placement of these students in special education. The researchers discussed the refer-test-place process that was mistakenly viewed as the first step toward special education. Within the problem-solving model, the aim was to provide resources and supports so that students remained in the general education classroom, and continued to be taught by the general education staff.

Vaughn and Fuchs (2003) reviewed research and addressed the controversy over the IQ/achievement discrepancy and named five assumptions that were not supported. These included: no meaningful relationship to the severity of the learning disability, the difference of academic performance of students with discrepancy versus students without discrepancy, the lack of reliable information the discrepancy provides, the lack of useful information to drive instruction, and insufficient supporting evidence that an IQ test is a necessary procedure for the identification of a disability. They went on to cite several disadvantages of the wait to fail model: delayed identification for students with learning disabilities, flawed teacher observation, false negatives, and no connection between the identification measures and classroom instruction.

Dexter and Hughes (2011) reviewed 13 studies of existing RTI models at elementary schools. Each model used either a problem-solving method which designed interventions specific to an individual student, or a standard protocol model which used pre-selected research-based interventions. Of the 13 studies, all demonstrated some level of academic improvement, primarily in the areas of early reading and math skills. The majority of the studies did not include an examination of higher-level skills in the areas of reading and math, and no use of RTI at the middle and high school was investigated. The rate of referral and placement in special education remained stable, with but a few studies finding a slight decrease. The researchers warned that the results of the studies were impacted by a research design that ascertains a causal relationship between a specific program and its outcomes.

While the Individual Education Program Team may determine the presence of a learning disability if a student shows a severe discrepancy between achievement and intellectual ability (Bradley et al., 2005) relying on IQ/achievement discrepancy can leave a susceptible student unidentified for a learning disability and struggling well into the upper grades. Delay of services, outcome bias, wait to fail, and lack of instructional data bring into question the appropriateness of IQ testing. With the RTI model, students who lag behind their peers can receive specialized prevention or remediation within the confines of general education, thus allowing for early detection and intervention.

### **Problem-Solving Model**

The problem-solving model involves four key factors: early classroom interventions, goal setting, databased decision-making, and functional evaluation procedures (Marston et al., 2003). The problem-solving model allows for both academic and behavioral problems to be evaluated by the level of response to team identified interventions (Carney & Stiefel, 2008). As feedback is

collected on student progress, modifications may be made to the interventions. This process provides methods that are true to the long-term goal of identifying effective interventions for each student. With standard protocol, the use of intelligence tests is the traditional criterion. To shift to a problem-solving model, a paradigm shift is necessary. The philosophy of the problem-solving model centers on the individual student response to instruction as determination for special education eligibility (Marston et al., 2003).

Pennsylvania established instructional support teams in grades kindergarten through six. These teams were made up of the school principal, the student's teacher, support staff, and other school personnel deemed appropriate for the student's needs. The instructional support team process included an entry phase that began with interviewing and observing the students as part of an academic assessment as well as a curriculum-based assessment. The second phase, hypothesis forming, identified the problem, set goals, and most importantly linked strategy to these announcements. The verifying phase established the intervention, monitored the progress, and made any adjustments as necessary. Additionally, support was available to the teacher as the teacher implemented the strategy and collected feedback data. The outcome phase determined the effect of the intervention and determined whether or not there was need for further evaluation. Typical interventions often required the student to receive instruction on materials not used in the classroom. By design, the instructional support team aimed to change this pullout approach by providing the intervention within the general classroom and supporting the teacher with the process. Kovalski, Gickling, Morrow, & Swank, (1999) conducted a study to determine the effectiveness of this process. Through a series of observations of students involved in interventions at various phases, the researchers focused on time-on-task, task completion, and task comprehension. A number of factors were identified as obstacles to collaboration including

rules (both real and imagined), regulations, and school schedules and settings that do not encourage collective problem-solving. They went on to discuss the over-identification of students eligible for special education programs that may not have neurologically based disabilities but rather are products of their academic environment. Problem-solving teams that would identify and address students' needs before a special education referral may play a large role in student success as well as a reduction in the number of referrals. The results of the study focused on the quality of service and the learning that resulted, and determined that students who receive services that were implemented with integrity performed better than students who received low levels of implementation or no implementation.

Carney & Stiefel (2008) also studied the instructional support teams in Pennsylvania through data collection which included instructional support files, report cards, discipline reports, and special education files over a period of 3 ½ years. The researchers found that the school-based teams were effective in reducing referral rates for special education evaluation, reducing retention rates, and the vast majority of students initially referred to the instructional support team were not referred for special education evaluation. Reorganizing the initial reaction to a struggling student with the efforts of school-based team may not only address the needs of the students but also aid in collegial collaboration.

The problem-solving model within the Minneapolis Public Schools followed a four step procedure: describe with specificity the academic or behavioral issue, develop and implement intervention strategies, monitor progress and effectiveness of the intervention, and continue as necessary. This model is used for providing interventions, making referrals, conducting evaluations, and ultimately for eligibility decisions. The focus of this model is with the classroom teacher incorporating the resources of a collaborative team to discuss observations,



specific student difficulties, and offers solutions. Students who do not respond adequately to the provision of the interventions are considered for special education referral (Marston et al., 2003).

The team continues to work with the classroom teacher after tier 1 interventions have been implemented by refining the interventions as well as the progress monitoring strategies.

Interventions remain within the realm of the general education teacher until the team recommends the involvement of other supports. With school psychologists and social workers as members of the problem-solving team, the improvement in the assessment and decision-making process is considered apparent. To determine outcomes, data were collected in the areas of child count, achievement, referral rates, eligibility and disproportionality. With the problem-solving model, improved behavioral performance of minority students, increased implementation of research-based interventions, and improved identification of students receiving assistance within the general education classroom had all been observed (Marston et al., 2003).

Telzrow, McNamara and Hollinger (2000) discussed the ambiguity of reliably implementing the problem-solving approach in schools. Through data analysis of 227 multidisciplinary teams, as well as a review of demographic data for the participating schools, they conducted a study to address multidisciplinary teams in regard to fidelity to eight problem-solving components, student attainment of academic and behavioral goals, and the relationship between implementation and student outcomes. While acknowledging the evolution of the problem-solving model in this study, the researchers paralleled this to the evolution experienced with the introduction of any statewide change initiatives. With a focus on fidelity of implementation of the problem-solving model and the resulting benefits, they acknowledged the benefits identified in previous research. These include reduced numbers of referrals for

specialized evaluations, fewer special education placements, and enhanced academic and behavioral outcomes for students, as well as the progression of collaboration.

The eight problem-solving components included behavioral definition of the target behavior, direct measure of the student's behavior in a natural setting prior to the intervention (baseline), clearly identified goals, hypothesized reason for the problem, systematic step-by-step intervention plan, evidence that the intervention was implemented as designed (treatment integrity), data indicating student response to intervention, and a direct comparison of the student's postintervention performance of baseline data. Each school submitted what they considered to be the single case which reflected the most complete and accurate implementation of the problem-solving process. Likert scales and scoring rubrics were used to assign ratings for each case documentation submitted by a school. The results of this study showed that the multidisciplinary teams implemented these problem-solving components with varying degrees of fidelity. The multidisciplinary teams were able to identify the target behavior in measurable and observable terms but indirectly provided baseline measures. Goals had clearly identified criteria, but not specific target dates. In identifying the problem, student characteristics were considered but not external factors. Interventions considered only some of the factors available to the team. As a result, the data indicated that fidelity did not reach the standards expected (Telzrow et al., 2000).

Benefits of using a problem-solving model can include emphasis on early classroom interventions, goal setting, database decision-making, and functional evaluation procedures. Additional benefits may include reduced rates of referral and fewer special education placements. These benefits may results in better identification of general education students requiring assistance. Additionally, problem-solving teams can be used to foster collaboration.

## **Professional Development**

The role of professional development is to provide experiences that will offer a teacher an opportunity to participate in activities to improve the skills expected for optimal performance.

This general term is also referred to as staff development and continuing education. The expectation is that professional development will impact student outcomes. In fact, determining the effectiveness of professional development is now directly connected to student outcomes. As teachers' skills improve, the expectation is that student outcomes will also improve. Lack of research, however, questions the accuracy of these criteria (Kratochwill et al., 2007).

Professional development in the area of RTI requires both preservice and in-service training. Two key areas to be included in this training are the conceptual, methodological, and practical aspects of RTI; as well as change factors that must be identified in the process of introducing any new initiative. Specific to professional development in the area of RTI is the training for conducting new assessments, selecting and implementing appropriate interventions, and continuous provisions of successful services (Kratochwill et al., 2007).

As general education teachers receive professional development in the area of RTI, there is an expectation that their attitudes and beliefs about the topic will change. Guskey (2002) warns that changes in attitudes and beliefs of classroom teachers do not occur during the professional development session, but rather during the successful implementation of the initiative. The researcher stated that change in the mindset of the teacher will be impacted when the students reach desired learning outcomes. It is the classroom experience that will spark change, not the professional development.

Essential elements are identified for training educators to use RTI methods. The first element is to prepare for several sessions of RTI training for school personnel. Guskey and Yoon

(2009) discussed the importance of adequate time allowed for effective professional development. Time used for professional development must be organized and structured with the focus addressing predetermined goals. Adequate time is necessary for educators to deepen their understanding of the instructional message of the training. The researchers continued to state that school improvement does not occur without well-implemented professional development.

Beginning with an overview of RTI methods for all school personnel ensures that all staff members have exposure to the expectations of RTI. Follow-up sessions include more detailed explanation including identification of appropriate interventions and benchmark training. Including integrity as part of the training can address the anxieties of teachers as they begin this new initiative (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005). Additional training may be necessary for teacher familiarity for progress monitoring and problem-solving procedures (Marston et al., 2003).

Kratchowill et al. (2007) referred to the Coordination, Consultation, and Evaluation Center at the University of Wisconsin - Madison and the work they have done conducting professional development activities at six research centers. As a result of a longitudinal study of the centers, successful elements of professional development have been identified. These include: building upon pre-existing programs in schools and utilizing previous training and background knowledge of school personnel; using activities such as group discussions, case studies, and role-playing with intervention materials; discussing problem-solving as a collaborative activity; providing mentoring and coaching throughout the beginning steps of implementation; and evaluation strategies that include self-reports of treatment integrity. Professional development information is available from the National Staff Development Council for use as a guide to plan, design, and evaluate programs. The standards are broken down into

three categories: context, which focuses on learning communities, leadership, and resources; process, which stresses design collaboration and evaluation; and content standards which concentrate on equity, quality teaching, and family involvement ([www.nsdc.org/standards/](http://www.nsdc.org/standards/)).

When the focus of professional development is on a strong content area and is directly aligned with teacher goals and state standards, there is opportunity for active learning.

Introducing a new initiative such as RTI presents quite a change for an organization and can bring with it anxiety, rivalry, political pressures, and social stressors (Shapiro & Clemens, 2009). A survey of elementary, secondary, and special education teacher candidates in a Masters level program showed insufficient training and instructional practices for behavior issues, academic assessment strategies, and instructional programs (Begeny & Martens, 2006). As evidence-based practices are a key component of RTI and debates continue as to how to define evidence-based practices, the result is a critical need to adequately train teachers. As the understanding of RTI evolves, professional development must evolve accordingly.

As professional development is no longer considered merely the dissemination of knowledge, its multifaceted challenges need to be acknowledged and faced (Kratchowill et al., 2007). RTI will evolve and the supporting professional development must evolve with it. As Glover et al. (2007) stated, effective professional development research is available; however the research is often not implemented in school districts. A onetime training workshop, used to address a number of issues in school districts, is not effective for RTI training. Ongoing training is required for school personnel.

### **Special Education Placement**

A component of several RTI studies addressed the issue of referral rates. Marston et al. (2003), in their work with the Minneapolis Public Schools, found an increased number of

referrals for tier 2 interventions, while the number of students identified for special education services remained constant.

O'Connor, Fulmer, Harty, and Bell (2005b) examined interventions provided to kindergarten through third grade students in the area of reading. The interventions they studied were second and third tier interventions. Historically, 15% of kindergarteners through third graders were found eligible for special education. After four years of participation in the intervention process, placement in special education was reduced to 8%. O'Connor et al. (2005b) stated that although there was a decrease in special education placement, there was no confidence that the early intervention was the cause of this decrease. They made reference to students they described as "near average" with reading achievement but who received special education eligibility. The belief was that concentrated provisions, in the form of interventions, increased both in time and intensity such that the results could be considered special education.

Dexter et al. (2008) referred to students who successfully responded to tier 1 interventions in primary grades but who struggled in the older grades. The level of difficulty of skills taught in the older grades may explain this. They also referred to the lack of a universal definition of a non-responder that makes it difficult to reach any conclusions about special education placements.

While RTI could explain a decrease in the number of students qualifying for eligibility in special education under the category of specific learning disability, it could also result in an increase in eligible students under other categories of special education. In a study examining identification and evaluation of children for special education with an RTI model, VanDerHeyden, Witt, and Gilbertson (2007) examined the use of the System to Enhance Educational Performance (STEEP) model of assessment for identification of children who may

be eligible for special-education assessment. STEEP is made up of assessment and intervention procedures that include specific rules for identifying children who may benefit from a special education eligibility evaluation. The researchers commented on the students who qualified for services due to speech, cognitive or behavior problems. Including all categories in the study resulted in a decrease for students qualifying for specific learning disability, but an increase for qualifying students under other categories.

Although claims of reduced numbers of students eligible for special education services are spouted by proponents of RTI, the research data provide mixed results. With the results of studies ranging from identifying no change in the eligibility rate, to uncertainty about the actual cause of reduced rates, to increase in other areas of special education, the need for additional research is apparent.

### **Interventions**

While interventions are a key component of any RTI model, research on specific interventions is scarce. Kovalski et al. (2007) discussed the presupposition that the interventions are carried out with fidelity, when fidelity may not be monitored within the schools. They also referred to the lack of descriptions of the interventions used by the Instructional Support Teams and therefore determined that the effectiveness of the interventions cannot be reviewed.

Additionally the Instructional Support Teams were effective only with strong efforts by the implementer. Efforts that were considered halfhearted showed that the interventions did not have an impact on student progress.

Through analysis of a variety of assessments measuring phonological processing, fluency in connected text, and comprehension, Harn et al. (2008) examined first grade students receiving interventions and looked specifically at group size, instructional delivery, and instructional time.

They reported that students receiving more intense interventions (one hour per day for 24 weeks) performed better than students receiving less intensive interventions (30 minutes per day for 25 weeks). These gains were identified in all areas measured except passage comprehension. The researchers warn however that long-term gains were not studied and remain unknown.

Bryant et al., (2008) examined the data collected from the *Texas Early Mathematics Inventories-Progress Monitoring*, and the mathematics subtests from the *Stanford Achievement Test-10th Edition* administered to first and second grade students receiving tier 2 interventions for difficulties in mathematics. Findings varied according to grade level. For first grade students receiving tier 2 interventions, there was no general program effect; however for second grade students there was a positive program effect. The researchers questioned whether the needs of the first-graders could have been addressed with additional intervention time addressing number tasks. Despite this statement the researchers noted that the performance of the tier 2 second graders still was below the average of their peers. They believed more powerful interventions may be necessary to improve the performance of the students.

By following the progress of 206 students in kindergartners through third grade, O'Connor et al. (2005a) conducted an examination of tier 2 and tier 3 interventions and found that the earlier the intervention is implemented, combined with the continuous implementation of effective interventions, will result in improvements in the area of reading. They also recognized that by second or third grade however, a student who has an inadequate response to tier 2 requires instruction outside of the general education classroom.

Simmons, Coyne, Kwok, McDonagh, Harn, and Kame'enui (2008) reviewed the progress of 41 students identified as at-risk for reading and followed them from kindergarten through third grade. Students were defined as at-risk at the beginning of kindergarten if they performed below



the 30th percentile. The researchers observed if timely, continuous, small group instruction could impact the reading progress of at-risk students and raise their performance to a level of their non at-risk peers. They found that the majority of students who received these interventions from the beginning of kindergarten did respond positively, and these levels were sustained through third grade. Only the measure of oral reading fluency fell below the 40th percentile.

Based on data collected from the *Brigance Preschool Screen* and curriculum-based measurement probes, VanDerHeyden et al. (2007) conducted a study in a rural preschool program to determine the use of curriculum-based early literacy measures as a screening tool for early literacy skills. Their results indicate that classwide interventions may affect progress more strongly than individual interventions. Because the schools were in a rural area, and represented only one district, questions remain as to the generalizabilities of these findings.

Vaughn et al. (2003) studied 45 second grade students for 10 weeks and reviewed the results of the students' responses to reading interventions. After administering subtests of the *Woodcock Reading Mastery Test Revised* and the *Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing* they identified fluency, passage comprehension, and rapid naming as the significant predictors to determine exit criteria. Rapid naming was identified as the best predictor, as it showed significant differences between those students with adequate progress and those with inadequate progress. Their findings support the belief that supplemental instruction can be beneficial to students in general education. The researchers stated that response to treatment as an option that should be continued as part of the identification process of students with learning disabilities. Acknowledging that qualification for special education has never been easily determined, using response to treatment is one criterion.

Wanzek and Vaughn (2008) examined two groups of first grade students still demonstrating low levels of reading despite previous interventions. Students were divided into three groups that received a single dose of intervention, a double dose of interventions, or no intervention. Results from the pretests and posttests of the Word Attack and Passage Comprehension subtests of the *Woodcock Reading Mastery Test Revised*, as well as the *DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency* indicate that doubling the intensity of the intervention did not seem to increase the number of students that responded to the interventions. However students who did receive intervention showed more progress than students who received no interventions. The researchers questioned whether the amount of time, 10 weeks, was significantly long enough for the students to respond to the interventions.

An examination of how students with previous low response to interventions responded to increased levels of intensity of interventions addressed the lack of studies on specific intervention effectiveness (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2008). The research on specific interventions, length of time of implementation of interventions, intensity of interventions, optimal group size for interventions, and the difference between tier 1, tier 2, and tier 3 interventions is still in its infancy. As a key component of RTI, intervention research is essential.

Vaughn, Denton, and Fletcher (2010) reviewed more than 20 studies focused on levels of intensity of interventions and determined that for primary grade students, teacher-student ratios no larger than 1:3 are optimum. The small size of the group allows the teacher to respond appropriately to the students with immediate feedback. They also concluded that one-on-one interventions are no more effective than with groups of three students. The researchers commented on the few studies completed that address the same treatment provided with various levels of intensity, as well as the lack of studies addressing students in higher grade levels.

Research on specific interventions is in an early stage. Components of intervention implementation require additional studies. These components include length of time an intervention is used, including the number of minutes per session and the total number of sessions; number of students in the group receiving interventions; fidelity of implementation; and the interventions themselves.

### **Changing Roles of School Personnel**

With the establishment of RTI in school districts, roles of school personnel are shifting. In the Minneapolis Public School system, Marston et al. (2003) described that the problem-solving model has seen a change in the role of teachers, specialists, and administrators. According to program evaluation data available from the inception of the problem-solving model in 1994, general education teachers are no longer relying on the grade level curriculum but rather are turning to a wide range of interventions. During the tier 1 phase special education teachers, Title I teachers, and remedial teachers are providing input to classroom teachers as part of the collaborative efforts of meeting instructional needs. This collaboration was observed across disciplines in general education and special education. School psychologists and social workers, as part of a collaborative team, were also more involved in the general education classrooms. Together these various support personnel worked directly with the classroom teacher with the provision of interventions and progress monitoring of student performance. Additionally, as the number of interventions increased to address student needs, administrators were challenged to find necessary resources to meet student needs under RTI. These resources included a planning time for the problem-solving teams to meet, as well as revision of schedules for students, general education teachers, and specialists.

Lau et al. (2006) described the problem-solving process that increases the consultative role of the school psychologist in order to address teachers, parents, students, and other related service providers. They also acknowledged the role of the school psychologist in the areas of curriculum, instructional methods, and other supports for at-risk students. By calling on their background in learning theory, child development, applied behavior analysis, and child psychopathology, the school psychologist undergoes a paradigm shift with a focus on problem-solving. After reviewing the work of the Heartland Area Education Agency 11 in Iowa, an alternative to the traditional evaluation model, as well as conducting a case study of a second grade student in the Minneapolis Public Schools System, the researchers posed implications of a problem-solving model for school psychologist. The problem-solving model addressed the three questions of what criteria will be used (IQ /achievement discrepancy versus ecological factors), how the assessments will be completed (dynamic versus norm-referenced), and where data are collected (general education classroom versus school psychologist's office). A key factor in these three questions was a relationship between collected data and interventions. Machek and Nelson (2007) also discussed the changing world of school psychologists. They defined the role change as one that shifts from assessor to problem solver. This change provided opportunities to school psychologists to expand their professional responsibilities to include consultative adviser for the areas of interventions and problem-solving.

As Lau et al. (2006) have suggested, the principal should be considered the change agent who must lead all school personnel into new ways of thinking. Classroom teacher resistance may result from skepticism, perceptions of an increased workload, and insufficient support. Teacher acceptance should be the first step prior to implementation of a new initiative. Teachers should understand the need for the change, as well as the rationale for the change. It is up to school

district administration to communicate effectively to the classroom teachers that the basis for placement decisions will be the RTI model, not subjective judgment; that RTI is expected to minimize preconceived mind-sets; and RTI will open the door for implementation of interventions. All personnel must view RTI not as a trend, but rather a general education initiative accepted by the district to become part of school culture. The success of a new initiative requires ongoing administrative support, and this may require an investment of time by the principal, which may be the most difficult resource to make available (Lau et al., 2006).

Lau et al. (2006) continued to suggest that a bonus of RTI is the documentation of the interventions available for special education teachers by the time a student is eligible for services. The data provided can be used to develop an assessment plan, the individualized education plan, and instructional program. While this may free up additional time in the special education teacher's schedule, the collaboration provided to the general education teacher in assisting with goal writing, intervention identification, and data collection may offset any gain in time. Additionally, the special education teacher may also begin coaching, mentoring, and modeling for the general education teachers (Lau et al., 2006).

### **General Education Teacher**

As the 'street level workers' the general education teachers fill a vital position in the determination of special education eligibility (Mellard et al., 2004). They have the opportunity to see a child in comparison to his/her peers in the classroom, other students in the school, and even previous students. While local efforts may play a larger role in the eligibility process than federal or state policy, teacher perception of the context of the application of RTI may determine its actual implementation. The researchers conducted focus groups to review factors that influence the special education eligibility decision for the presence of a learning disability. They

found that the concerns of stakeholders were about the provision of services to students who need them, rather than eligibility decision about a disability. They discussed the motivation of classroom teachers to provide services to students who they observed needed them the most. Classroom teachers valued the perceived needs of the student within their classroom over the district and federal guidelines in determining which students should receive services.

Glover et al. (2007) identified three factors necessary for successful implementation of interventions: acceptability, training and support. The more acceptable the classroom teacher found the intervention, the more likely the intervention would be used, and the more likely the outcomes would be positive. Three different methods for training teachers included didactic, modeling, and rehearsal with feedback. Modeling and rehearsal with feedback, which can be described as direct training procedures, resulted in higher levels of integrity than the verbal explanation. Support was evaluated three different ways: brief weekly interviews, consultation focusing on commitment to implementation, and performance feedback. Performance feedback produced the highest levels of integrity.

Case et al. (2003) gathered background information of the general education teachers participating in their study. This included number of years of teaching, ethnicity, and earned degrees. They also analyzed the management style, student interaction, and instructional methods of each teacher. Following classroom observations of the general education teachers, the researchers conducted interviews. The focus of the interview was centered on the teacher's philosophy toward planning, reading instruction, and assessment; beliefs about at-risk students and the type of instruction required for these students; and the objectives of the lesson that was observed.

The researchers also gathered information about each student to identify a ‘persona’ of that student. The student’s background, academic progress, level of support provided at home, home and school relationship, and disposition observed at school were used to identify the persona. Merging the student and teacher information, they examined the dynamic between student persona and classroom environment to view how students access instruction. The combination of a strong student persona and a strong environment provided optimal access to instruction. A weak instructional environment paired with a strong student persona required the student to compensate in order to provide access to instruction. A weak student persona and a strong environment required the teacher to actively reach out for student engagement; if the student did not respond, instructional access did not occur. With a weak student persona in a weak environment, the struggles of the student were intensified (Case et al., 2003).

Machek and Nelson (2007) stated that it is important to identify the views of the general education teachers. The attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of those implementing RTI can offer insight into how the initiative will be practiced. If the initiative is not embraced by the classroom teacher, the fidelity of implementation may be jeopardized.

### **Conclusion**

The controversy about how to best determine if a student has a learning disability has impacted the field of special education for decades. The IQ/discrepancy model, which was the legislated approach prior to 2004, has been criticized for many reasons. Because the most recent authorization of IDEA allows school districts to determine the presence of a disability based on a student’s response to interventions, the RTI process may now replace the IQ/discrepancy formula. Yet there is scant amount of research available on RTI to support its use. Moreover, it is difficult to draw conclusions from what is available not only because of the limited number of

studies, but also because of the range of topics addressed within that limited number and general use of small sample sizes in each study. Well designed, comprehensive research agendas are needed for two reasons: to examine the extent to which the RTI approach, with its many components, will best meet the students' academic and behavioral needs; and to determine if RTI is a viable educational policy. Undefined variables may impact not only the progress and placement of students, but also the implied failure or success of the initiative.

### **Adding an Initiative to a School System**

Change is messy. From the policymaker who believes a good idea will flourish on its own (Fullan, 2007), to the superintendent who looks for a quick fix (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996), from the principal who does not believe change is necessary, to the teacher who is fundamentally resistant to change (Darling-Hammond, 1997), change is messy. As Fullan and Hargreaves (2009) described, change begins with a vision. The ultimate vision is one of educational reform that addresses the benchmarks and inequalities in schools. This vision reaches out to the public as it requests to team up with society. Change has meaning and goals, and is enveloped in flexibility.

In the 1960s, school reform on a large scale was unsuccessful as it ignored the culture of schools and districts which were asked to develop new innovations. A decade later, large scale reform was replaced with a focus on individual schools instituting new programs. The 1980s led way to accountability schemes that did not consider local capacity for supporting school improvement. In the rush to respond to public pressure to improve educational systems, there was little consideration of the long-term implications (Fullan, 2007). The subject of educational reform is multifaceted and encompasses school culture, staff collaboration, individualism, professional development, leadership, relationships, and sustainability.



The basic function of education is to impart change, change that prepares young generations to facilitate the greatest good (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2009). Judging school reform in the past has been based on documented improvements in student learning (Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu & Easton, 2010). However institutional change is complicated. Without evidence of immediate student gains, an innovation may not be considered successful. Researchers (e.g. Bryk et al., 2010; Fullan, 2007; & Reeves, 2009) warned that evidentiary change takes years to develop. Long-term improvements are developmental and sequential by nature and the effectiveness of a new innovation may not immediately be recognized.

Currently, two contrasting theories of school reform exist. The first theory highlights additional tests, prescriptive curricula, tighter regulations, and more sanctions. The second theory seeks to increase teacher education in the forms of developing inquiring, collaborative organizations. According to Darling-Hammond (1997) public schools have a weakness in the area of professional decision-making. She questioned if teachers take the opportunity to share knowledge about effective teaching practices for the benefit of all students. She went on to add that the definition of professionalism has changed from practical application of educational knowledge in order to serve the needs of students, to compliance with district, state, and national directives.

Change, regarded as a process not an event (Fullan, 2007), consists of three phases. The first phase, which can alternately be called initiation, mobilization, or adoption, includes the background operations involved with the decision to proceed with the change. The second phase, known as the implementation or initial use of the change, is the actual introduction and use of the change. The third phase also known as continuation, incorporation, routinization, or institutionalization, determines whether the change becomes a part of the system or is discarded

due to active decision or attrition. The process of change is extensive. A change that may be considered small may take two to four years to become part of a school system, the larger change may take five to ten years.

The initiation phase provides time to identify four characteristics of the new innovation: needs, clarity, complexity, and quality/practicality. Identifying needs requires assuredness that the need is not only significant but also able to be met. Clarity is necessary to ensure that the innovation is not presented with oversimplification, and that the goals of the innovation are attainable. Simple changes, while easier to put into practice, may not make the difference that a more complex change can offer. The more complex the innovation, the more demand on the implementers, and the greater the reward with successful implementation. When the reason for the change is politically based, the adoption of the innovation may take precedence over the implementation. As a result, quality may be jeopardized (Fullan, 2007). Often, the time and effort spent developing a new program far outweighs the time and effort spent implementing the program (Levin, 2009).

As Fullan (2007) stated, "The proof is in the 'putting'" (p. 13). The way an innovation is actualized helps to determine its chance for success. For the implementation stage to be effective, steps should be taken to address the needs of the entire system. This may include high quality support for leadership development, sufficient allocation of resources, ongoing professional development, and strengthening the infrastructure at all levels of the system (Levin, 2009). Implementation also relies on experience. Experience offers insights to build upon, and purposeful experiences provide the foundation for the implementation of a new innovation (Fullan, 2009).

Despite research on educational change, resulting theories are not always applied practically at the school level. Research addresses longitudinal improvements from cross-sectional approaches at different stages of development. Without attention paid to the individual level, research can seem distant and unworkable. Providing teachers with practical information for implementation of theories of improvements at the classroom level does not always happen, and therefore educational improvement may be stymied (Elmore, 2009).

Too often change is designed to address the immediacy of the moment. When this happens, change is neither significant nor profound, and certainly not long-lasting. Like the principal who reads about a new strategy, insists on immediate implementation, and proceeds to the next problem, change is nothing more than window dressing (Reeves, 2009). The excitement that accompanies the rush to implement a new idea consumes more energy than long-term attempts that might provide sustainable change (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2009).

### **School Culture**

"If you want to know what water is, don't ask a fish" (Abrahamson, 2004, p.94). As this Chinese saying suggests, perceptive insights exist only when perceiving what is not. The very existence of culture is often hidden to those immersed in it. The longer one is embedded in a culture the more invisible the culture becomes. Abrahamson (2004) defined culture as values, shared beliefs about what is important; norms, collective, even unconscious, ways of behaving; and roles, jobs assumed by employees that are included and not included in their job description. These values, norms, and roles can emerge within a culture separate from leadership. A strong culture is one that embraces its values deeply and opposes those who act in violation of its norms. Values of the strong culture do not exist solely in public relations pamphlets and remain

unknown by most staff members; they are seen in the everyday actions of the workers. A strong culture influences the performance of employees.

Hargreaves (1994) referred to two dimensions of the culture of teaching: content and form. The content of the teacher culture includes attitudes, values, beliefs, habits, assumptions and ways of doing things within the teaching community. This can be evident in what teachers think, say, and do. It is often referred to as, "the way we do things around here." The form of the teacher culture is found in how the relationships between teachers and colleagues are expressed. It may be individualistic or collaborative. In the process of understanding the form of teacher culture it becomes conceivable to understand the possibilities and limits of educational change.

In 1992, Consolidated Edison hired a new Chief Executive Officer who was anxious to make significant change in the organization. Included in this change was a plan to destroy the old culture and create a new one. Years after the change was initiated, surveys measured almost imperceptible cultural changes (Abrahamson, 2004). Two approaches to change are creative destruction and creative recombination. Creative destruction refers to destroying the old culture and replacing it with a new one. Destroying the culture requires that employees are no longer rewarded for what they have historically valued, and are rewarded for what they do not value. As the CEO at Consolidated Edison discovered, this method is ineffective. Day to day procedures strengthen the existing culture. Attempts at destroying existing culture can end up reinforcing it. Creative recombination can be accomplished by recognizing cultural values, norms and roles and reinforcing those that are useful in problem solving and creating opportunities. This route can identify elements of a culture that have been latent in the organization and reidentify and recombine those elements as part of the change process (Abrahamson, 2004).

A cultural view of a school acknowledges day-to-day operations rooted in the beliefs, practices and working relationships among teachers and students. Cultures do not exist in a vacuum, and they are not neutral. They will either unite teachers or separate them. They can offer opportunities for learning or present obstacles to possibilities. The influence of the existing culture is more powerful than structural reforms (Fullan, Hill, & Crevola, 2006; Hargreaves, 1994). Changes that recognize and support the culture itself are more likely to be effective. Hargreaves (1994) referred to this process not as restructuring, but as re-culturing.

Ignoring the emotional culture of an organization impacts the possibility of successful change (Jansen, 2009). It is important to identify the attitudes of those implementing the change (Machek & Nelson, 2007). An experienced teacher may not readily discard strategies and methods that have proven effective. Change that builds on the existing ideas of teachers involves less risk of alienating teachers (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

There is a fine line between respecting the culture of a school and romanticizing it. The practices and beliefs of teachers come not only from their experiences, but also from the routines to which they have become attached. Within the context of a school, teachers develop strategies which are sustained over time. With similar demands and constraints that span many years the culture is reinforced. While these routines may initially have been put in place for political or moral purposes, their current purposes may be very different. Acknowledging the importance of these routines and building on them in the form of collective improvement increases the odds of successful change (Hargreaves, 1994).

Change will be effective only when it is embraced by the culture of the school (Mellard et al., 2004). Implementing brand-new solutions that disregard existing culture is a strategy of creative destruction. Creatively recombining parts of the existing culture with new elements may

allow for slow, steady adaptation to change. Identifying critical factors of the school culture is the first step toward successful change. The second step is one of establishing dynamic connectivity with what already works.

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration requires connecting through conversation, working jointly, conveying respect, and demonstrating inclusion (Kanter, 2004). Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) described effective collaboration existing in the discussion of ideas, examination of existing practices, criticism of current roles, and seeking better alternatives. Collaboration can be observed throughout the school in the form of gestures, jokes, and knowing looks of sympathy or understanding. It is evident in the personal interest shown among and between staff members. Collaboration travels beyond collegiality to a place where teachers learn from each other, develop expertise together, and share ideas and perspectives. The importance of collaboration among school personnel cannot be understated. Successful working relationships allow for true professional growth (Hargreaves 1994).

Collaborative cultures are described as spontaneous, emerging from the teaching community; voluntary, valued by the teachers; development-oriented, teachers committed to the initiative; pervasive across time and space, teachers work together above and beyond planned meetings and sessions; and unpredictable, implementation as it exists in the classroom not at the district/state/national level. Through collaboration, teachers challenge each other's practices, perspectives and assumptions in a way that is professional and supportive (Hargreaves 1994). When teachers have the opportunity to collaborate, the result can be teacher empowerment.

A collaborative model offers moral support to the implementers of a new innovation. This moral support is present as teachers allow vulnerabilities to be expressed. It also allows

failures and frustrations to be viewed as learning steps in the process of change. This is evident in risk-taking, introduction of new classroom strategies, and shared work demands among teachers, administration, and staff. Two-way communication addressing realistic expectations concerning day-to-day operations enhances the possibility of successful implementation (Hargreaves 1994). Teachers interact with confidence as they receive and provide feedback. Collective knowledge increases, and teachers value time to reflect (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). As a powerful source of professional learning, collaboration leads to continuous reevaluation and growth (Elmore, 2009). Collaboration breeds collaboration.

While collaboration has numerous benefits in a school, collaboration that is superficial and artificial is known as contrived collegiality (Hargreaves, 1994). Contrived collegiality exhibits behavior that is administratively regulated, not spontaneously initiated by teachers; compulsory, with little discretion for individuality; implementation-oriented, with requirements for teachers to work together; fixed in time and space, planned meetings; and predictable, implementation as determined by administration. Contrived collegiality can be observed in mandated preparation time, removing flexibility and discretion of the classroom teacher; arranged consultation with special education resource teachers, removing the opportunity for teachers to share information and placing the emphasis on special education teacher expertise; and required peer coaching, focusing less on cognitive reflection and more on compulsory meetings. Consequences of contrived collegiality are inflexibility and inefficiency in the forms of forced meetings even when there is no business to discuss, and arranged partners regardless of ability to work together. Collaboration is powerful which means that it can be powerfully wrong (Fullan, 2007).

Collaboration can become too comfortable (Fullan & Hargreaves 1996). Elements of comfortable collaboration exist in a culture of casualness and warmth rather than organization and efficiency. A lack of clarity and collective certainty about policy results from reliance on memory and oral tradition rather than written records. Comfortable collaboration can be reduced to comfortable activities such as sharing resources and joint lesson plan preparation, while disregarding the importance of reflection of value and purpose as well as engaging in pedagogical discussions. This condensed form of collegiality can also be described as congeniality (Hargreaves, 1994).

Reviewing the collaborative culture of a school may be necessary to determine its effects. Effective collaboration searches for options that will result in school improvement. This is accomplished through critical examination, open discussion, and constructive reflection. Collaboration is a journey with no shortcuts (Fullan & Hargreaves 1996). A cultural collaboration not only can result in student success but can also improve teacher retention (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2009). Effective teacher collaboration aids in successful implementation of a new innovation (Elmore, 2009).

### **Individualism**

Classroom isolation can be defined as teaching alone behind closed doors in the isolated environments of the classroom (Hargreaves, 1994). While this seclusion can provide privacy and protection from outside interference, it also can reduce the amount of adult feedback the teacher receives. Reasons for teacher isolation include the architectural structure of schools, specifically the walled, individual classroom, and the consequence of teachers protecting the uncertainties of their teaching.



While individualism is considered poor practice in many schools, even pointing to teacher deficiencies, the nature of the practice is not always negative. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) differentiated between individualism and individuality. They described individualism as working alone, while individuality refers to opportunities for solitude and experiences of personal meaning. Hargreaves (1994) identified three types of individualism. Constrained individualism situates the teacher teaching, planning, and generally working alone based on administrative constraints. Strategic individualism refers to the active construction and creation of individual working practices in response to the requirements of the work itself. Elected individualism is the choice to work alone even when opportunities exist to collaborate with colleagues.

A balance should exist between the creative outlet of teacher individuality and the rewards of collaboration (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). As reflection is a key element of collaboration, discretion encourages the individual to take time alone for contemplation and self-observation. While forced isolation can lead to a culture where individualism is viewed as unconstructive, the benefits of solitude should be considered.

### **Professional Development**

Implementation of change cannot be left to chance; it must be carefully nurtured. For change to be effective, teachers require not only the desire for the change, but also the know-how (Levin, 2009). Improving student outcomes requires investment in developing teachers into effective instructors. Professional development is most effective when it is school-based and rooted in teachers' daily work. Teachers who receive substantial professional development can increase student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Professional development, also referred to as professional learning, is effective when it considers the teacher's purpose, the

teacher as a person, the real-world contexts in which a teacher works, and the culture of teaching - specifically the working relationships that teachers have with their colleagues (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). This approach considers the total teacher, and is driven by strategies to improve the quality and performance of schools.

Teachers learn by doing. This includes studying, reflecting, collaborating with other teachers, conducting their own inquiries, and developing portfolios about their practice. The connection between theory and practice is addressed when discussing the context of real students doing real work in a real classroom. Teachers do not learn best by reading research reports, listening to speeches, or attending workshops (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

Effective professional development is centered on the critical activities of teaching and learning, including creation of lesson plans, evaluation of student work, and development of curriculum. It includes investigations of practice through questions and criticism of authentic cases. It is based on substantial professional discourse that encourages communication and collaboration. Effective professional development is experiential; grounded in teacher inquiry; connected directly to the teacher work; supported by modeling, coaching and problem solving (Darling-Hammond, 1997); connected to school change; builds on teacher beliefs and experience; and provides adequate time for follow-up and opportunities for reflection (Bryk et al., 2010).

Despite existing research on effective professional development, some school districts still choose strategies that prove to be ineffective (Glover & DiPerna, 2007). When professional development is driven by pressure (either administrative or political) to quickly implement a trendy innovation, there is a tendency to view the teacher as a passive player (Fullan &

Hargreaves, 1996), who needs to be fed a quick diet of instant know-how. Ineffective professional development methods include onetime training workshops (Glover & DiPerna, 2007), announcements followed by handouts (Levin, 2009), and fragmented presentations that do not link the innovation to classroom practice (Fullan et al., 2006).

School effectiveness is largely dependent on teacher capacity to coordinate instructional work and problem solve classroom concerns. Quality professional development allows strengthening of the processes that support faculty learning (Bryk et al., 2010). As change is introduced to the school system, teachers should be armed with the ability to use good judgment and make sound decisions for the implementation of the innovation (Darling-Hammond, 1997). If teachers are unprepared and unsupported, school reform may be defeated. Lack of professional knowledge can seriously hamper successful implementation.

As teachers are given the opportunity to investigate the effects of their own teaching they learn to look at their classroom through multiple perspectives. Professional development focused on important elements of teacher effectiveness, knowledge of subject matter, student learning and development, and teaching methods (Fullan, 2007) will empower teachers with a greater understanding of the complex situations within their classrooms and learn to use this information to become more thoughtful decision-makers (Darling-Hammond, 1997). When change results in improved student learning, teachers will retain the change (Guskey, 2002).

### **Leadership**

School leadership is a key factor in educational reform. Successful implementation of a new innovation is largely dependent on successful school leadership (Spillane, 2009). As changes are introduced into a school system, the leader takes on the role of architect. As the architect, the leader not only provides the blueprints, but explains the blueprints in clear

language, and imparts the reasons for the change (Reeves, 2009). Support for change does not come as a result of lectures from leaders followed by orders to implement. Leaders must remember that an idea grows because of its value, not because the leader said it would (Levin, 2009). When introducing a new innovation effective leaders provided an inclusive, facilitative orientation; focused on student learning; managed efficiently; and provided support. Throughout the implementation stage there was a focus on instruction, standards, assessment, continuous feedback and use of data, and instructional leadership (Fullan, 2007).

Effective leaders understand the importance of maintaining a sense of direction. While distractions regularly occur, focusing on the original goals and strategies is fundamental. A leader who understands the school community can predict distractions. Viewing multiple perspectives of the change can help the leader regard the opposition as having genuine issues. Anticipation of potential problems that might arise acknowledges the presence of opposition and prepares the leader for action (Levin, 2009).

Successfully introducing a new innovation relies on leadership that can establish a common vision (Shirley, 2009). Using the power of their offices, effective leaders work toward cohesion and consistency in developing new practices. Inspirational leadership values both individual and collective advancement wrapped around a common understanding of growth (Bryk et al., 2010).

Innovative ideas require innovative leaders (Shirley, 2009). For significant change to occur, a school community may have to put aside a past history of difficulties in working together. Leaders who focus on creating a sense of community within the school can begin with increasing teacher influence. Teachers who feel a sense of having influence on school decisions may more easily commit to the long-term work of change (Bryk et al., 2010). Providing teachers

with opportunities to observe other teachers opens up possibilities of developing new frames of reference both individually and as a group (Shirley, 2009).

Leadership that does not involve the teacher will likely fail (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Effective principals encourage collaboration and support among their teachers, improve learning resources for teachers, and support transitions as change is introduced in the school community (Fullan, 2007). By creating an environment for innovation to be embraced and nurtured by the staff, teachers do not view the change as a mandatory solution, but rather an opportunity for improvement (Reeves, 2009).

While ongoing communication is an essential element of education reform, it is often ignored. With the multifaceted job description of school leaders, combined with the day-to-day interruptions of running a school, leaders do not always value the time it takes to convince school personnel of the importance of a new innovation (Levin, 2009). Lack of communication can lead to misinformation, half-truths, and rumors. Effective communication operates in two directions with both school leaders and teachers listening and talking. Teachers may not always communicate about their progress with the implementation of an innovation due to their fear of revealing imperfections. Leaders can assuage these fears by building trust and acknowledging the existence of problems at all levels. When teachers understand the reform strategy it provides an opportunity for feedback which provides an opportunity for refinement of the strategy. Honest dialogue builds more trust which builds more dialogue. When a leader can comfortably discuss and address problems, teachers will see this as a strength. (Fullan, 2009).

Communication with parents and the community is also a key factor in bringing a new innovation into the school. This level of communication is more complex. The goals of the innovation should be stated publicly and repeatedly to help increase the level of confidence in

the school system. The school system is part of the larger societal community, and the ultimate goals of school reform, including the development of literate and numerate citizens, social cohesion, and economic prosperity, will benefit the larger community (Fullan, 2009).

An important role of leadership is to nurture potential leaders. Leadership can and should come from a variety of sources both in the school and the local community (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). When responsibilities are collectively circulated, accountability is also circulated. Distributed leadership sets the groundwork for future leaders.

Spillane (2009) recognized the crucial role of leadership in education reform and calls for additional research to better understand its influence. As school leaders are the key agents in managing change, their role must be studied. Improving school leadership requires a diagnosis of the practice of leading and managing from perspectives both inside and outside of schools. The success or failure of educational reform may depend on school leadership and management, particularly reforms designed to improve the quality of classroom teaching and student learning.

### **Relationships**

According to Bryk et al. (2000) school reform efforts occur more readily in a school that has a basis of strong relational trust. Trust is experienced in day-to-day social exchanges, grows over time through these exchanges, and is validated by social actions. As trust increases productive organizational change follows.

Social respect is the basis of relational trust. Listening, acknowledging opinions, and respectfully responding to those who disagree are at the center of a sense of trust. Reform asks teachers to take on additional work in the form of planning and evaluating with colleagues. A sense of trust among and between colleagues can be a catalyst for positive action. Professionals who trust each other have an increased sense of security in attempting new practices in the

classroom, as they seek to learn from one another during the implementation phase. The vulnerabilities of sharing uncertainties and doubts are narrowed in an atmosphere of relational trust (Bryk, et al., 2000). Relational trust creates the social foundation that provides the underlying supports for a new initiative.

Implementing a new innovation requires ongoing learning; learning in context is beneficial to the process. Ongoing learning is relational when support is available both with in-house colleagues and with external experts (Fullan, 2007). When improving relationships is a core strategy of the new innovation, the chances for success are increased. Change initiatives that develop collaboration, even when little collaboration existed before the change, have a greater chance of developing relational trust (Fullan et al., 2006).

### **General Education Teacher**

The classroom teacher does not view change as a flowchart, or a spreadsheet, or even an elaborate PowerPoint presentation (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Change occurs when teachers understand the why behind the change (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008); embrace the change (Levin, 2009); receive ongoing, effective professional development for the change (Darling-Hammond, 1997); successfully collaborate in the process of change (Fullan, 2007); trust the leadership guiding them through the change (Spillane, 2009); and teach in working conditions that support the change (Fullan, 2009).

Darling-Hammond (1997) defined learning as a process that relies on past experiences and ideas to make meaning out of newly introduced information. This construction of knowledge is based on cognitive maps that organize and interpret new information. The role of the teacher is to guide the student in mapping out connections between new ideas and prior experiences. In this sense, instruction is a stream, not an event, employing focused teaching with an intimate

knowledge of each student (Fullan et al., 2006). Teachers have been described as among the most important influences on the development of young children (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996) and classroom teachers are asked to make numerous decisions over the course of a day that apply not only to dissemination of content material, but also to individual students' abilities and needs. Focusing strictly on behavioral objectives limits the flexibility teachers need in responding to student ideas and actions (Darling-Hammond, 1997). In the effort to initiate school change, the first step is to ensure that the change is ultimately aimed at improving student learning (Shirley, 2009). Teachers must be seen as the active implementers of the change. If teachers are seen only as a limited phase of the change process, the change has little hope for success.

Change that respects the role of the teacher builds on the knowledge and ideas teachers already have (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). When policymakers and administrators understand what motivates teachers and gives them purpose in their work, possibilities for implementing change improve. This can be accomplished by giving teachers voice and actively listening to that voice, providing opportunities for teachers to openly discuss their beliefs in their practices, avoiding change for the sake of change, and empowering teachers with substantial decision-making responsibility.

Veteran teachers, who have experienced change in the past, may approach a new initiative with little enthusiasm. Having experienced unsuccessful change over the years, they are unlikely to react with a great amount of zeal to a new idea (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Having developed successful instructional practices, experienced teachers may approach new ideas prudently and may even bring cynicism with their efforts. Successful implementation relies on small-scale improvements with realistic objectives.



Attempts to improve instruction do not always take into account the social context of the classroom. Teachers who question their self-worth are more concerned with covering the material than are confident teachers. When teachers have little control over what is taught they tend to have feelings of powerlessness, which contributes to questioning their self-worth. As demands are imposed on teachers, the feeling of powerlessness may grow as new pressures, which they may not understand, are forced upon them. When the change reduces time for planning and collaboration there is added pressure. The long-term impact of this may be the teacher doubting his or her own ability to effectively teach (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

As change is guided by student improvement, change happens when it influences the conditions directly impacting teachers' work to advance student learning (Bryk, et al., 2010). One element identified as having a direct emphasis on instructional improvement is time (Bryk, et al., 2010; Hargreaves, 1994). Time not only structures the work of teachers, it can become the very core of teachers' work. Time is a scarce resource, and can be viewed as constraining, in the form of schedules and timetables. Teachers have stated that given the opportunity for more hours in a week they would use those hours on preparation and collaboration (Fullan, 2009). Effective leaders are aware of and sensitive to the time element of a new innovation. An administrator who understands the elements of time within the teacher's day can identify and respond to what is necessary for planning, executing, developing, implementing, and evaluating a new innovation (Hargreaves, 1994).

When asked to identify characteristics of an effective and enriched environment for teaching, classroom teachers described quality leadership; teacher empowerment; flexibility, adaptability, and creativity in the classroom; positive rapport with parents, mutual support and validation between the school and community (Fullan, 2007), supportive working conditions,

sufficient pay, and professional autonomy. Teachers discussed their greatest rewards as the times when they reached a group of students, and when they observed learning on the part of students (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2009).

### **Sustainability**

The process of educational change has two components: initiating and sustaining. Sustainability, in the form of profound change, may take years to acquire, however the results may be long-term improvements (Bryk, et al., 2010). A foundation of achieving sustainable change addresses the beliefs and understanding on the part of the implementers. An innovation becomes institutionalized when it is built into the structure both in procedure and in the budget, and has established regulations for continuing the provision of resources for ongoing implementation (Fullan, 2007).

Hargreaves and Fullan (2009) identified five mainstays required for sustainable educational change. The first mainstay, which they described as the most indispensable for any action change, is moral purpose: the guidance system of the change. The next two mainstays, connecting with the public; and drawing on families, communities and society; rest on the research that school effectiveness requires investments of external supports. The fourth mainstay, reinstating critical thinking into the curricula, focuses on the development of higher level thinking skills. Finally, the researchers turned to the students. They described the students as change partners, not just targets of change efforts. Involving students in the change strategy gives students the opportunity to plan for their own learning, reflect on their learning style, and share this information with their teachers.

Interactive professionalism is a key element in sustainability of change. Interactive professionalism actively seeks out new ideas both internally and externally, and calls for regular

reflection about new practices. This requires a redefinition of not only the role of teachers but also may impact the role of the community (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

Dexter and Hughes (2011) identified four factors that led to sustainability of RTI programs. These factors included: extensive and ongoing professional development, administrative support, teacher buy-in, and adequate time for collaboration. For change to be sustainable, it must be considered a long-term process that includes attention to all levels of the change process including planning, developing, implementing, and evaluating. Change in an organization involves internal and external stakeholders, and addresses not only the outward signs of change, but also the underlying beliefs that drive the change.

### **Why Change Fails**

Most attempts at educational change fail (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). Since the 1980s, school reform that was done to the system has proven ineffective. Solutions that are imposed from the outside produce resistance from those required to implement the change, and result in no motivation for sustainability of change (Levin, 2009).

Fullan (2007) identified five main barriers to successful change: more time spent on planning the change than implementing the change; no reflection on current practices; lack of teacher action on the change due to overt administrative pressure; measurement and monitoring systems that preoccupy implementers; and internal competition that infects the spread of the change. When policymakers focus on the initiation stage, and do not invest in the development phase, success is jeopardized. Change that does not consider both the context and culture of the school may result in failure.

Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) stated that educational reform addresses multifaceted problems that cannot be addressed with unilateral solutions. Policymakers look for immediate

results with unrealistic timelines. A quick fix solution may initially satisfy the public, but it has no opportunity to address underlying issues. Many strategies not only fail to motivate teachers for effective implementation of the change but actually alienate them in the process. Change resistance is a powerful force that can be based on traditional and personal beliefs (Reeves, 2009). When change is introduced in an aura of confusion and inefficiency, failure is inevitable (Fullan, 2007).

### **Conclusion**

Educational change crosses a variety of networks aimed at increasing student and teacher performance. Change is a personal and collective experience that if successful, can result in professional growth. The measurement of change, substantial improvements in student learning, is complex and requires complex efforts. Change begins with the development of a common vision and continues with the development of confidence and consistency among the entire school community. Successful change does not occur without conflict: there is no magic formula. Change is messy.

## **Chapter III**

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to examine the viewpoints of general education teachers as they implement RTI. Qualitative research was used to provide a vehicle for the classroom teachers to describe in detail their knowledge and perceptions. As stated by Ambert et al. (1995), qualitative research allows for the opportunity for the unexpected to emerge. This emergence can be a description of a participant's truth that may not be discovered using quantitative methods. In this study, interviews were conducted to allow participants to describe the truth as they saw it in their own words. Eisner (1998) referred to the difficulty of finding the personal signature of a teacher. When a researcher is able to find meaning through the course of an interview, the distinguishing individuality of the teacher comes through, and the information becomes research.

Patton (1990) discussed the use of a qualitative interview to learn about what cannot be directly observed. An interview allows entering another person's perspective to learn feelings, thoughts, and intentions. Variations in human experiences can emerge (Patton, 1990), and the intricacies of an individual experience may be captured (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) through a qualitative interview. As pedagogy refers to the art and science of teaching, the qualitative interview may provide a window to both.

The qualitative researcher views the interview as an opportunity to gather insights from one who is entrenched in the field. Through conversation, the richness and depth of the experiences of the respondent provide a perspective that allows the construction of knowledge. As participants tell their stories, it is up to the interviewer to hear the stories, make sense of the stories, and view it as research.

## **Setting**

The setting of this study was a suburban school district of a large Midwestern city. The district had more than ten schools with an enrollment of over 5,000 students. Both the student and teacher populations were more than 90% White. The school district chose to take a proactive approach towards the implementation of RTI by introducing administrative and faculty members to a training program two years prior to the state mandated date of implementation. The district used a three-tiered model of RTI, beginning with a problem-solving model. The steps of the problem-solving model were to identify the problem, analyze the problem, plan interventions, and monitor the progress.

Tier 1 consisted of practices and supports available to all students within the general curriculum. Tier 2 allowed for supplemental instruction and short-term interventions to those students who did not respond to tier 1 instruction. Students not progressing satisfactorily to tier 2 interventions received more intensive interventions at the tier 3 level. Tier 3 included intensive individualized interventions with weekly progress monitoring. The final step was the special education referral process.

## **Participants**

Interviewees were selected purposefully. Patton (1990) referred to the power of purposeful sampling in providing information-rich case studies. He described an information-rich case as one that provides a depth of information that is important to the purpose of the study. Purposeful sampling also allowed the researcher to select participants who shed light on the research questions. Maximum variation sampling required the researcher to identify diverse criteria among the pool of participants. In this study, variety is defined in terms of grade level and participation in training. Purposeful sampling led to information that highlighted

programmatic variation as well as identify common patterns within that variation. Purposeful sampling was chosen in lieu of random sampling because of the limited number of participants within the scope of this study. This provided the opportunity to include a wider variety of dissimilarity, and may be referred to as a sample chosen to maximize range (Weiss, 1994).

The criteria for participating in this study included second and third grade teachers who had been teaching in the district since the first training session for RTI provided by the district, in other words, teachers who had been teaching in the district no fewer than three years. Fifteen teachers initially agreed to participate, however one participant dropped out of the study during the initial interview. Fourteen second and third grade teachers each completed one face-to-face interview conducted during spring semester of the 2010-2011 school year. Eleven teachers participated in a follow-up phone interview. The 14 participants were classroom teachers with the district prior to the onset of training and implementation and have remained classroom teachers throughout the training and implementation. All participating teachers were White females. Years of teaching experience ranged from three to more than twenty years. Three teachers had completed master's degrees as reading specialists, one teacher was LBS-1 certified, one teacher was eligible for an LBS-1 certificate but had not applied for certification, and one teacher had Type 75 certification.

The interviews were conducted during spring semester of the 2010-2011 school year at the home school of the participant in a room selected by the participant. For each interview, the room chosen provided privacy, comfortable seating, and relative quiet. Throughout the interviews, occasional background noises in the form of students in the hallway or announcements through the public address system temporarily interrupted the interview. It is my impression that these interruptions did not impact the flow of conversation during the interview.

Participants were invited to participate in a follow-up phone interview during the summer of 2011. The phone interviews were conducted at a time that was convenient for the participants, however limited availability of the teachers during the summer resulted in a reduced number of participants for the phone interviews. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Participants had the opportunity to review a written copy of the transcript which was mailed to them, to edit the transcript and return it to the researcher.

### **Training Provided by the District**

Professional development was provided to the district during the summer prior to the first year of implementation. Specific teachers chosen by the district, as well as administrators and support personnel attended this training. The trained teachers and administrators then provided training to their faculty members. Also, all teachers were given the opportunity to earn Continuing Professional Development Units by attending additional sessions provided through the district. The sessions were not mandatory. Throughout the year, the district offered workshops on a variety of topics, including RTI presentations which the teachers had the opportunity to attend. The schools continued to update the training during the institute days at the beginning of each school year and also retained time during faculty meetings to address RTI questions.

Over the course of the past three years, three different areas of interventions were introduced. During the first year reading interventions were initiated, the second year focused on behavioral interventions, and during this past year, the third year of implementation, math interventions were introduced.

A training manual was developed by the school district and distributed to each teacher.



The manual described the foundational principles of RTI, a description of the problem-solving model and RTI process, roles and responsibilities of personnel in the district, strategies and accommodations for students, and lists of interventions.

### **Study Design**

This study was a case study of the phenomenon of RTI as implemented in a school district. Second and third grade general education teachers participated through a series of interviews: the first interview was face-to-face at the home school of the participant; the second interview was over the telephone. Participation in the interviews was voluntary and all participants provided informed consent. Fourteen teachers participated in the first interviews. The follow-up phone interviews were conducted during the summer when teacher availability was limited. As a result, 11 teachers participated in phone interviews. The interviews were conducted with open ended questions addressing the knowledge and perceptions of the teachers.

Patton (1990) described the informal conversational interview as using the spontaneous and natural flow of a conversation and allowing for flexibility in the pursuit of information. This type of interview allowed for individual differences and situational changes. The interview took on a conversational style, but the focus was predetermined. The semi-structured interview was designed to allow the participant to fully communicate how RTI looks in the classroom and to identify other existing variables. With the emphasis on quality rather than quantity, the objective was not to maximize the number of teachers interviewed, but rather to become saturated with information on the topic.

### **Data Collection**

The primary data collection method was in-depth, semi-structured interviews, following an interview guide (see Appendix A). The interview guide provided some structure to the

interview, even though the interviews themselves took on the form of a conversation about the topic. The interview guide included the areas to be covered in the interview and served as a prompt during the interview (Weiss, 1994). The interview guide included a list of topics that could be seen with just a glance, and included specific questions to begin discussion areas.

Although there were few standardized questions prepared before the interview, the guide acted as a checklist to be sure all topics were discussed. Additionally, a journal was completed throughout the interview process.

While the format of a semi-structured interview allowed for depth in answers provided by the participants, caution was taken to maintain control of the interview. According to Patton (1990) control of the interview can be maintained when the researcher knows what information is to be discovered, asks the right questions to get the desired answers, and provides appropriate verbal and nonverbal feedback to participants. Knowing what to uncover during an interview means that the researcher is able to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate responses. By listening carefully to be sure that the responses given do provide information pertaining to the questions that are asked, the researcher can provide appropriate feedback to maintain control of the interview. This can be accomplished through head nodding, taking notes, and silent probes which allow the researcher to remain quiet signaling to the participants that more information is requested.

Scheduling a single interview to explore the topic may not have provided the depth and richness needed for a case study. Therefore, each participant was invited to participate in two interviews. Laying a strong context during the first interview provided a greater possibility of exploring the meaning of the participant's experience in a second interview. Seidman (2006) described the importance of using the first interview to identify the framework of the second

interview. All participants were interviewed once before beginning the second set of interviews, allowing for items of interest that emerged during the first interviews to be discussed during the second interviews. The time between the first and second interview also provided time for the respondent to dwell on memories that were stirred up in the first meeting (Weiss, 1994). Each participant had the opportunity to read the transcript of the first interview before participating in the second interview. Ten of the fourteen participants made changes to the transcripts. One of the participants removed dialogue that pertained to a specific student. One participant changed the language she used to represent more of a written language appearance than conversational language. The remaining participants made changes such as correcting a single word, or clarifying a thought. During the second interview the established rapport led to a deeper discussion focused on the concrete details which were the basis for their opinions. Allowing the participants to reflect on the meaning of their experiences addressed intellectual and emotional connections. The first interview allowed the second interview to be productive.

As the interviews were conducted, documentation of the interviews was made through audio recordings. The use of computer recording and back up tape recorder allowed the interviewer to give full attention to the respondent, make good eye contact, and provide for an audio version of the interview (Charmaz, 2006; Patton, 1990). Not only the words, but also the tone of the voice and inflection were available for reviewing as many times as needed. Each face-to-face interview lasted between 45-90 minutes. Each phone interview lasted between 20-45 minutes. Each participant was previously informed of the time commitment of the interview process. This information was shared in an attempt to reduce anxiety in the participant as well as allow her to schedule appropriately for the interview.

During the research project I kept a journal. This was a personal document that recorded the journey through the interview process. Included in this document was a summary of events, dead ends and surprises, personal feelings, and questions about the future direction of the research. This day-to-day commentary on the direction of the data gathering was a collection of notes to myself (Gibbs, 2007). Illustrative excerpts from my journal include:

When talking about resources available, teachers focus on personnel, not materials.

Interesting.

Fran re-emphasized the need for time. I asked her what newly found time would look like. I want to add this question to the second interview.

After the interview, Vicky talked about a librarian, a year away from retirement, whose position is being cut for next year. The librarian was told that she could take a position as a third grade teacher. The librarian chose to retire early rather than have to do RTI.

Nancy told me that she initially did not want to interview, but decided to do it. I gave her the option to withdraw, and told her that any time during the interview or after the interview she could withdraw. After the interview she told me that she was glad she participated because the interview gave her the opportunity to think about aspects of RTI she had not considered.

Dewey (our dog) ran away this morning, so I am rather distracted even though we found her, then traffic on I80 was horrible and I arrived at 9:10 for a 9:15 interview. The teacher was waiting for me in the main office, so I had no time alone to set up. Then after the interview the Audacity did not save the audio version on the computer. I have

the tape recorder version, but it is so much harder to transcribe. I really hope that Ro can fix it. God bless Ro.

Shortly after the completion of each interview I completed a Contact Summary Form (Miles & Huberman, 1984) (see Appendix B). This form allowed me to consider a number of issues while the interview was fresh on my mind. Items completed on this form included themes that may have emerged during the interview; interesting and illuminating topics discussed; as well as comments about the knowledge and perceptions of the general education teacher toward RTI. In particular, this form included a list of information to be pursued in the second interview. Questions for the second interview were gleaned from the Contact Summary Form and transcript of the first interview.

During spring semester, 2009, I conducted a pilot project of five general education teachers, one special-education resource teacher and one principal in the district. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The general education teachers included a sixth grade teacher; a fifth grade teacher; a third grade teacher; and two second grade teachers, one of whom was an RTI Facilitator. I developed interview questions, piloted them with the participants, audiotaped the interviews, transcribed the interviews, and began the initial steps of analysis.

I learned a great deal from the pilot project. I came to understand the importance of transcribing the audiotape as soon as possible after an interview, beginning the coding process immediately, and completing a summary sheet immediately following an interview. The pilot project was extremely useful in learning about interviewing as an approach within qualitative research.

## **Trustworthiness**

Schram (2006) discussed the establishment of trustworthiness in a qualitative study. He defined trustworthiness as the believability and trust in the integrity of the study. Three steps in achieving trustworthiness are consequences of presence, selective experience, and engaged subjectivity. Consequences of presence refer to the researcher's task of assuming there is no single correct perception to determine the truth of a phenomenon, but rather to uncover the participants' meaning of their experiences. Selective experience allows the researcher to accept that there is no one complete or correct version of an event. Engaged subjectivity requires the researcher to examine his or her own emotional involvement with this study.

Two methods for increasing the trustworthiness of strategies were employed: triangulation and member checking. Triangulation allowed me to confirm information through the use of various procedures collected from a variety of data sources. The term data sources did not specifically require the use of different methods; data sources can be attained using a single method. Johnson (1997) refers specifically to the use of multiple interviews as providing multiple data sources within a single method. Triangulation of data sources was achieved through the first and second interviews of the participants, as well as through the documents provided for the training sessions. Member checking was the method used to provide collected data to the participants for the purpose of credibility (Krefting, 1991). This procedure ensured accurate representation of viewpoints. Member checking allowed the participants to review the transcript of the interviews after each interview and provide feedback.

## **Ethical Considerations**

A variety of ethical issues present themselves during qualitative research. As the interview depends on personal interaction, ethical implications must be considered. Kvale (2007)

and Gibbs (2007) listed a number of ethical questions to contemplate prior to the interview process. These questions refer to informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and the role of the researcher.

Informed consent includes the purpose of the study and the background of the researcher, and identifies benefits and possible risks to participants (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Interviewees signed a consent form (Appendix C), assuring that participation was voluntary, and they were informed of their rights to withdraw at any point in the study. The participant's right to privacy included the researcher's withholding of identifying information in collected data. To protect their identity, the names of the participants were changed. Additionally, Institutional Review Board approval helped ensure ethical issues. As the researcher, I had no professional relationship with the district; the participants were informed of my status as a doctoral student at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

## **Analysis**

According to Gibbs (2007), a researcher who is interviewing for the purpose of finding the participant's interpretation of an experience may develop a transcript of the interview that is similar to normal text and is a good copy of the conversation of the interview. As dialogue is rarely continuous, it does not follow the grammatical rules of written text. I tidied up the speech of the participants. This process was used because the details of expression in the language were not the focus, but rather the actual contents of the transcript. Transcripts mailed to the participants were written with the tidied up speech.

Seidman (2006) explained a categorical way of organizing excerpts from transcripts. By looking for patterns and connections in the excerpts, themes will emerge. While marking the transcripts, I began to label the marked passages. By determining the subject of the marked

passage, I began the process of classifying or coding. It was important to realize that labels were to be considered tentative; some codes worked out, others led to dead ends, and new codes emerged later on in the process. Excerpts were marked because they were connected to passages from other participants, connected to literature on the topic, or because they were contradictory and inconsistent with other excerpts. While this may be considered an intuitive process, the connection and repetition that emerged between excerpts determined their own criteria through the sorting process. According to Cresswell (2007), case study analysis requires a detailed description of both the case and its setting. This included pulling the data apart and reassembling them in meaningful ways by looking for patterns.

Coding was an ongoing process that began after the first interview and continued throughout the entire process. The process of coding the data commenced with identifying meaningful segments and naming each segment. The number of initial codes exceeded 100. Through a process of elimination, combination, rephrasing, and regrouping, the number of codes changed. This process of discernment continued and the number of codes continued to change, decreasing when a code did not work out, and occasionally increasing as a new pattern would materialize. Eventually, these codes were then combined into broader themes, which became the core elements of the data analysis (Creswell, 2007). It was important to read transcripts in their entirety several times to get a sense of each interview before breaking it apart. Reviewing interview data throughout the coding process provided the opportunity to truly hear what the participants reported. Throughout this classification system, descriptive detail emerged, and this descriptive detail became a central part of the case study.

Analysis comes from not only the data, but also from the perspectives of the researcher (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The principles held by the researcher can impact the selection of



segments to code. Acknowledging my own background added to the validity of the investigation (Kvale, 2007). As a special education teacher for 25 years, I have developed and established new special education programs at three nonpublic high schools. As a result, I bring firsthand knowledge of introducing a new initiative to a school. Additionally, two of my five children have been identified with learning disabilities; therefore, as a parent, I have been involved with the ability/achievement discrepancy identification process through the public school system.

The social constructivist paradigm is a model which allows an individual to seek to understand the world in which they live and work (Creswell, 2007). As the participants described their experiences, it was up to me to search for the complexity of these experiences, as opposed to narrowing the perspectives to a few categories. No pre-determined theory guided the selection of codes; rather a pattern of meaning emerged through the interviews. It was my intent to make sense of the meaning that the participants expressed about their experiences.

Chapter IV will discuss the findings as they relate to the knowledge and perceptions of the participants.

## **Chapter IV**

### **RESULTS**

As Machek and Nelson (2007) stated, the attitudes, perceptions and beliefs of those implementing Response to Intervention can offer insight into how the initiative will be practiced. This chapter will present findings based on interviews with 14 second and third grade teachers who taught in a suburban school district located near a large Midwestern city. The purpose of this descriptive case study was to examine the viewpoints of general education teachers as they implemented RTI in the classroom. The study focused on the knowledge and perceptions of the teachers concerning RTI. Teachers discussed their understanding of the new initiative, as well as its purpose, and the impact they perceived both on their students and themselves.

The introduction of RTI requires schools to change. This change impacts not only students but also faculty. When introducing an initiative as broad as RTI, it is important to understand what is necessary to effectively implement school change.

#### **Structure of Chapter IV**

As the participants discussed their knowledge and perceptions of RTI, ten themes emerged. Chapter IV begins with a description of the participants, a summary of data analysis procedures, and then is divided into two sections. Section I discusses the participants' knowledge of RTI as depicted through their explanation of RTI and discussion of its purpose. Section II discusses the participants' perceptions of RTI as it impacted themselves and their students. Finally, noteworthy topics from individual participants are presented.

#### **Participants**

Fourteen second and third grade teachers participated in individual face-to-face interviews conducted during the spring semester of the 2010-2011 school year. Eleven teachers

participated in follow-up phone interviews conducted during the summer of 2011. The 14 participants were classroom teachers with the district prior to the onset of training and implementation and have remained classroom teachers for the past three years. All participating teachers were white females. The experience of the teachers ranged from three to more than 20 years, and each teacher had taught in the district for no fewer than three years. One teacher had LBS-1 certification and recently completed a Master's Degree as a Reading Specialist, and one teacher was eligible for an LBS-1 certificate but had not applied for certification. One teacher had recently received Type 75 certification.

### **Summary of Data Analysis Procedures**

A three-step process was used to develop themes. First, through the process of listening to the audio recordings of the interviews and transcribing, reading and rereading the interviews, I immersed myself in the data. Second, as the large amount of data resulted in a large number of codes, through successive stages including identifying patterns and connections, the number of codes was reduced. This process included regular review of the literature. Finally themes emerged which were supported with quotes from the participants.

### **Section I**

Section I discusses the knowledge of the participants concerning RTI. Two themes emerged. The first theme surrounds the explanation of RTI as the classroom teachers experienced it in their classrooms. The second theme addresses the participants' description of the purpose of RTI.

### **Knowledge of RTI**

Hughes and Dexter (2011) described RTI as an instructional framework for the provision of early interventions in the areas of academics and behavior, and which includes the core

components of universal screening, progress monitoring, scientifically based interventions provided through a system of tiers, data-based assessment of student progress, and fidelity of implementation. Barnes and Harlacher (2008) identified two purposes of RTI: identification of a learning disability and provision of improved academic outcomes for all students. To gain insight into the knowledge of the participants concerning RTI, participants described RTI and discussed its purpose.

**The participants know the components of RTI, but focused on the needs of the students.**

To begin the discussion of a participant's knowledge of RTI, each teacher was asked how to explain RTI to a new teacher. Participants discussed the various aspects of RTI including the fluidity of RTI as they described it as a vehicle for meeting the needs of students, a way to allow students to become successful through a system of tiers. They discussed members of the support staff that implemented interventions, and made a connection between RTI and special education. Teachers named both academic and behavioral aspects of RTI, and compared RTI with their previous teaching experiences. A common thread throughout the explanations was the focus on meeting the needs of the students.

Cindy, who described RTI as a verb, discussed the fluid series of steps to assist the student who is not progressing appropriately and compared RTI to a safety net. She also referred to interventions as research-based and discussed the process of data collection to determine future steps for the student.

I would tell her that RTI is definitely a verb. I would tell her it's an ongoing process and I would say RTI is that safety net for all children...And it's our job, with interventions, with research-based interventions, to help that child and hopefully bring them back to tier

1. That's our goal of course to get all the children in tier 1, and so I would tell her that we are going to have to really spend a little bit more time with those children that you have in RTI, and then we're going to have to instruct them a little bit more than our tier 1 students and gather some data and look at our different possibilities of what we can do for interventions that help that child move along and progress.

Ellen discussed the tiers that include all students, and described the pull-out and push-in elements of RTI that may involve support staff. She also commented on RTI as a precursor to an evaluation.

I would first explain the three tiers, that it's an initiative that everyone is considered tier 1, and then typically within our school if they're receiving services from the reading specialist that will automatically place them as a tier 2 and that just means that they're receiving a little bit more extra help than everyone in the classroom. So that might mean that they're pulled out sometimes, sometimes the specialists might work within the classrooms to meet those with needs. And then if they're tier 3, they receive a more intense small group one-on-one instruction, and you know within this school we kinda see that as like the step before, if we wanted to go further into testing and explore other options.

Ada agreed with Cindy that RTI is a process designed to help students who are struggling, and discussed that interventions may begin at any point throughout the year.

I guess my definition or explanation would be we have some students that are really struggling, they are not at the level that we would like them to be, whether it's the beginning of the year, the middle of the year or the end of the year, as far as the progress

we would like them to make, or where they need to be at that point in time of the year, they need that extra help.

Nancy identified RTI as a general education initiative that seeks to identify academic struggles in the early stages. She also commented on the collaborative approach of RTI.

I would say that it's a gen ed initiative that helps the teachers to identify at an early on stage problems that the children are having, and how to work with the team as to what to do to help identify any kids that have a problem starting out.

Zoe discussed academic and behavioral reasons for implementing RTI interventions. She referred to RTI as a means of avoiding a label for students.

RTI is a program that helps students that have difficulty in the academic area and behavioral area, and it helps them advance and make gains without putting a label on their files permanently. And the teacher uses interventions with the students to increase their fluency, their reading, their comprehension, their math or their frequent behavioral difficulties that they may have in the classroom environment.

Rita discussed progress monitoring.

For those kids who are in tier 2, we progress monitor them. So any kid who is in Power Reading, or even if they didn't quite make it, but you want to keep an eye on them, we do a probe every two weeks.

Tanya discussed how RTI is similar to the differentiated teaching she had previously employed in the classroom and how it introduced new interventions to the classroom teacher.

It's part of the school, it's in the classroom, I've always done differentiated lessons...I think educators are more aware of different ways to help kids.

Olivia summed up RTI as a series of steps designed to meet the needs of students.

We go through steps, to try to get the interventions the children need, to best meet their needs.

Participants identified RTI as a general education initiative that is an on-going process including tiers of interventions designed to assist students who struggle in academic and behavioral areas. They discussed the presence of support staff and the need for collaboration, and commented on the similarity to previous teaching. Participants also acknowledged the role RTI plays in early identification of academic struggles as well as an antecedent to possible special education eligibility. Throughout the discussions, participants highlighted the dynamic nature of RTI. The focus of the explanations centered more on meeting the needs of the students and less on the specific components of RTI.

**The participants described the purpose of RTI as a focus on the individual student.**

While the initial purpose of RTI was identified as a universal screening of students which led to improved outcomes for students with learning disabilities, it has evolved to a system of supports for improving not only the implementation of interventions, but also general education instructional decision-making for all students (Sugai & Horner, 2009).

Participants described the purpose of RTI as meeting the needs of individual students. They spoke of holding high expectations for their students and providing the resources and supports to address their needs both academically and behaviorally. When asked to speak to the purpose of RTI, participants' responses focused on the individual student.

Terri commented on the purpose of RTI as a focus on the individual student to receive appropriate resources and supports to gain academic success.

Just to make sure that every child is achieving the level of success of which they're capable and seeing what resources are necessary, and support they need in order to

achieve success. Because some kids might just need that little extra boost. Sometimes they just need a little extra. So I think the purpose of it is to make sure every kid is getting what they need.

Sally discussed the high expectations she holds for all students.

I believe that we want all of our students to succeed at high levels, and there are students that need that little extra push in order to do that...It lets us see with these few interventions where these students can go.

Rita, stated the purpose of RTI was to provide interventions to students who may be struggling either academically or behaviorally.

The purpose of it would be to help us get the kids who are falling behind, giving them extra support. I know in my classroom that may be behavior or academic. So it can be both.

Fran stated that RTI includes steps to meet the needs of the students.

The purpose of RTI is to ensure that the students are learning in the way that suits them and to make sure that all students make adequate progress.

Tanya described the students who experience difficulty in the classroom, but have not been identified as eligible for special education services, and how the purpose of RTI is to try a variety of interventions to help them experience success.

To reach those kids that don't necessarily have a learning disability or might not necessarily qualify for services or to get those kids services before they actually qualify for services, try to help them, try different things to see if they can make progress.

Olivia discussed RTI as a general education initiative for purposes of remediation in academic and behavioral areas.



It's a general ed initiative that attempts to meet the needs of our children who need remediation. We go through steps, to try to get the interventions the children need, to best meet their needs. General ed students who need remediation, who need some sort of interventions for whatever, including behavior.

Wendy described RTI as a way to enrich the academic skills in students whose skills are lagging.

Basically, to benefit those kids who are struggling, to enrich their skills in reading or math...So just to kind of enrich those skills and to better them to try to meet their goals...So basically just increase their ability to do more of those subjects.

Ellen discussed the role of the classroom teacher with RTI was to help the student reach success in the classroom.

The purpose is basically to meet those needs, the students' needs within the classroom, and just help them to succeed and do what we need to do to help them succeed in the classroom.

Zoe summed up the purpose of RTI while discussing the goal of addressing academic and behavioral areas.

The purpose of RTI is to make academic gains for the students, also to make behavioral adjustments for the students.

Participants identified the purpose of RTI to include addressing the needs of individual students, through remediation and enrichment, in the areas of academics and behavior. The focus on the individual student guided the comments on the purpose of RTI.

In providing an explanation of RTI, the participants described an active process that included ongoing steps to address academic and behavioral areas. They described the purpose of

RTI as a means to identify and meet the needs of students. In discussing both an explanation of RTI and the purpose of RTI, participants focused on addressing the needs of the students.

## **Section II**

Section II discusses the perceptions of the participants concerning RTI. Eight themes emerged. The first four themes address the impact of RTI on the teachers. These themes include the topics of professional development, adjustments in the school day, resources, and frustration levels in the teachers. The next four themes address the impact on the students as perceived by the teachers. These themes address reactions from students receiving interventions, data-based decision-making, teacher observation of student performance, and the timeliness of data collection and intervention implementation.

### **Perceptions of RTI**

The role of the teacher is to guide the student in mapping out connections between new ideas and prior experiences. In this sense, instruction is a stream, not an event, employing focused teaching with an intimate knowledge of each student (Fullan et al., 2006). Teachers have been described as among the most important influences on the development of young children (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996) and classroom teachers are asked to make numerous decisions over the course of a day that apply not only to dissemination of content material, but also to individual students' abilities and needs.

#### **The participants described the professional development as inadequate.**

When introducing RTI to a school, the current literature stresses the importance of professional development with both pre-service and in-service training. Kratchowill et al. (2007) discussed the importance of providing mentoring and coaching throughout the beginning steps of implementation. On the topic of professional development while instituting school change, Levin

(2009) discussed the necessity of carefully nurturing all parties during the process of change. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) addressed the importance of considering the teacher's purpose and the context in which the teacher works. Making a connection between theory and practice provides the real-world experience that proves effective with staff development. When professional development encourages communication and collaboration, is grounded in teacher inquiry, is connected directly to teacher work (Darling-Hammond, 1997), is tied to teachers beliefs and experience, and provides teachers with time for reflection (Bryk et al., 2010), chances for effectiveness increase. Darling-Hammond (1997) discussed the importance of providing teachers with the tools to use good judgment and make sound decisions for the implementation of any newly introduced innovation. Empowering teachers with a greater understanding of an initiative new to their classroom allows the opportunity for teachers to develop into thoughtful decision-makers. School improvement does not occur without well-implemented professional development (Guskey & Yoon, 2009).

While discussing professional development, participants discussed the RTI training that was provided by the district at the beginning of the school year and throughout the year at faculty meetings. Ada questioned whether the information she received from the district regarding RTI qualified as professional development. She expressed uncertainty with the implementation of interventions in the classroom and asked if she would be held responsible for lack of progress with the students.

Unfortunately, I don't feel like we've had any training. I just kind of heard what it is, that this is kind of what it means, and sort of what we need you to do. But, no, there hasn't been any official training...I think there was kind of a definition and some literature handed out of what it is, but, and booklets like here's things you can do with your kids,

and like that they'd show you papers or a binder, this is what you do with RTI kids. How many times a week, how many times a month, we progress monitor, I know what that means, but, am I doing it correctly, am I doing it often enough? I don't know.

Nancy described the initial training as including what RTI was and how it was to be implemented in the classroom. She focused on the number of years ago that the training occurred.

At the very beginning when we first started this, three years ago now, three years ago, we had training in-service at the beginning of the school year. They basically told us what it was about, how we would be doing this.

Vicky stated that the minimal training that she received was helpful in completing the required paperwork.

Well, we didn't have very much, what we did get, helped us with the paperwork and knowing what we had to do with the paperwork.

Rita did attend optional RTI training sessions provided by the district, and referred to them as a class, but she did not consider it to be formal training.

I did take a class, it was not mandatory. I took a class through the district when we first started hearing that RTI was coming. They had a PowerPoint presentation, and they went through what RTI was and some interventions. Our building principal put out a spreadsheet of what were the interventions, what counted as interventions. But as far as formal training, not really any formal training.

Wendy, who did not attend the optional training sessions, stated that the training was nominal.

We just kind of got an idea of what kind of RTI interventions there are, and we were taught how to do those, then basically we just practiced them. Really, that is all the

training we have had. We just learned about the interventions and then we implement them in our classroom.

She went on to state that the teachers learn about interventions from each other.

People who have learned about the interventions kind of pass it along and then we kind of work on it together. But it is more so taking place in the building because it tends to be a little bit easier for us to kind of help each other and teach each other. So we've kind of done it more so in the building.

Terri suggested she might remember a district workshop.

I guess, uh, the whole district kinda just did a workshop.

Fran stated she received no training for the implementation of interventions.

I didn't get any training per se in any of the interventions, just in the actual: here's what RTI is.

Tanya denied receiving any professional development for RTI.

I don't know if we actually got any training, I know we had a few faculty meetings to talk about RTI and the different tiers, but at the school we did not get training.

Faith discussed how limited professional development led to apprehension among teachers during the beginning stages of RTI implementation.

We were kind of told what RTI stood for, what it meant, what it looked like for us.

Initially we really didn't understand like who would be doing what, I think a lot of it just had to fall into place, so the first few months I think we all were a little apprehensive. We really didn't know what was going to fall on our plates, so there wasn't a lot of initial information that was given to us.

The participants discussed the professional development they received from the district. One participant recognized that she did receive an introduction to specific interventions and familiarity with the paperwork. Participants questioned whether the information they received could be considered training. There was an overall description of disappointment with the lack of professional development provided by the district.

**Teachers turned to each other as their primary resource.**

General education teachers are no longer relying strictly on the grade level curriculum but rather are turning to a wide range of interventions. According to Marston et al. (2003), during the tier 1 phase special education teachers, Title I teachers, and remedial teachers provide input to classroom teachers as part of the collaborative efforts of meeting instructional needs. This collaboration may be observed across disciplines in general education and special education. School psychologists and social workers, as part of a collaborative team, are also more involved in the general education classrooms. Together these various support personnel work directly with the classroom teacher with the provision of interventions and progress monitoring of student performance. Hargreaves (1994) discussed the importance of collaboration and stated that successful working relationships in the form of collaboration, is what allows for true professional growth. A collaborative model will offer moral support to teachers as they implement a new innovation. True collaboration will allow for failures and frustrations to be spoken and shared, with an understanding of the importance of this learning step in the process of change. Providing teachers with the time to interact recognizes that collaboration is a powerful source of professional learning and continuous reevaluation and growth (Elmore, 2009).

Participants were given the opportunity to discuss the resources available for the implementation of RTI. Participants described the specific personnel in the building and in the

district who are familiar with the interventions and/or with the students as the first choice of who to turn to for guidance.

When discussing the training she received, Terri spoke of how the teachers turned to each other after the professional development to clarify their roles and described on the job training.

I think it was a team effort because we'd all meet as a team and say, "Okay, what do we do next?" And then our Special Ed teacher would be like, "Okay, this is what I think you should do," and the psychologist will tell us, "Okay, well this is what I think you should do" and then the social worker, and so I think it's just trial and error.

Sally spoke of turning to those who have experience with the implementation of interventions as the resources of choice for learning about interventions.

People that we know who get down and dirty and are actually implementing the interventions, those are the people that we seek out. That's what I do. And I know we kind of know the go-to people, too.

Rita spoke about the support staff who are readily available to provide direction to the classroom teachers.

Our reading specialists are real good, you can go to them and they'll tell you, "This is working, this isn't working. I'm using this program so you don't want to use the same program." Our special ed teachers are also real great at knowing and researching and letting us know which programs work and which programs we should try.

Vicky described her discussions with prior teachers about the interventions that were provided to students during the previous year.

We do talk to each other and as we're getting their kids given to us and we go and say, "What did you do for this child?" And the second week of school I'll say, "I see you've

done this, this, and this and I'm getting nowhere. What happened when you were doing that?"

Wendy discussed support from teachers in her building and other schools in the district.

A lot of times it comes within the building more so, or other teachers in the district that we have worked with, we can kind of contact them, "How do you do this intervention? Does it work?" That's kind of nice, because the best support is the people that are doing the same thing. That is for me, the best support system to have, because we are all in the same boat, figuring it out together, and making sure we're all doing it the right way...It tends to be a little bit easier for us to kind of help each other and teach each other. So we've kind of done it more so in the building.

Wendy also discussed the collaboration that happens naturally during the teacher lunch period.

[RTI] does come up as a topic of conversation a lot at lunch. We always are trying to figure out what's best for all of us, and take each other's opinions, "Okay I've tried, I've done this, this didn't work, but this did," basically just trying to get all the feedback from each other.

Tanya spoke of the support she received from the reading specialist.

The reading specialist comes to my room...We talk a lot about what to do with some of the kids, what ways we can help them, and things she's done in the past that she knows works.

Terri discussed how her support system would change as the needs of the students changed.

It seems like, last year was more the reading specialist. I had a lot of kids who needed reading. This year it's more behavior so I'm relying on the social worker. "Well what do you think I should try for this? What should I do now?" A year before that it was the



reading specialists and the resource teacher. But no matter what they're always there and you still rely on them, it just seems like some years you rely on certain people more. Just depending on the needs of your kids.

Faith spoke of the interventionist who has direct knowledge of both the interventions and the students receiving them, and is accessible to the classroom teachers.

Well, having the interventions specialist helps because her whole day is kind of comprised of helping the kids. She has a lot of availability.

Ada spoke of the grade level teachers on her floor who leaned on each other and also reached out to the support staff.

Up here it's more among my colleagues. We help each other and try to figure out what we're doing together, or we get ideas from...the reading specialist or the social worker and they'll kind of say, "OK, what are you doing? What kind of things are you implementing?"

Zoe described how the resource teachers, who may work with the same student over the course of first, second and third grades, are a source of guidance.

With the resource team, there's also a comfort zone, where you feel you can go up to these people because they are so welcoming, and they give suggestions, and a lot of times they may remember a student if they have seen them over the years so you have them in third grade but they may have seen them in the first grade with the same concerns, and they say, "Oh this happened back then," and they give suggestions of what may work.

Fran discussed the collaboration between herself and the special education teacher.

She worked really well with me where we decided together, "Ok these are the interventions, that's what she's doing and then I'm going to add this one in." I feel the

staff we have makes a difference, because we have a staff that's willing to help each other out, and I don't think you have that everywhere.

Participants valued the opinions of those who were providing the interventions themselves. They described an environment where teachers turned to each other for ideas and suggestions. They described collaboration as valued and practiced regularly. Absent in the discussion of resources were the in-district professional development presenters and the materials provided to the teachers during professional development sessions.

**The participants struggled to fit everything in.**

Participants discussed the necessity of adjusting their school day to make room for RTI. As the participants described how their day progressed they referred to the difficulty of fitting all the elements of their regular classroom routine and the components of RTI within the structure of the school day. Their comments clustered around the areas of time, scheduling, and the students who do not receive interventions.

*The lack of available time was considered an obstacle.* One element identified as having a direct emphasis on instructional improvement is time (Bryk, et al., 2010; Hargreaves, 1994). Time not only structures the work of teachers, it can become the very core of teachers' work. Time is a scarce resource, and can be viewed as constraining, in the form of schedules and timetables (Fullan, 2009).

Participants discussed the topic of time. They spoke of the impact that time has on providing interventions, collecting data, meeting the needs of other students in their classrooms, making curricular decisions, collaborating with other teachers, and balancing work and family.

Ada expressed concern about the amount of time that the students receiving interventions require from the classroom teacher at the expense of the students who are not receiving interventions.

There's not enough time in a day. It's very, very difficult on a classroom teacher to find time in a day... Something's got to give. What are the other students doing when you're the classroom teacher, with say 21 other students, what are they working on while you're working with the RTI kids? Because you already have your small Guided Reading group and you have your small math group, so it's very, very difficult to find time.

Wendy specifically identified the difficulty of scheduling the interventions as the basis for her struggle with time.

It's just trying to make sure you fit in the intervention, because you want to have that so many times a week, to have so many sessions so you can see if they're making improvement. I would say that would be the biggest impact for me is that it takes up a lot of time just fitting in the interventions into your schedule. That has been a struggle.

Ellen discussed her reliance on her classroom aide for implementing the interventions.

If I didn't have a classroom aide, I really don't know how I would be able to fit it all in, all the interventions, just because I have some for reading and some for math. Some of the interventions that we do have in place is re-teaching of the math lesson, so if I have to re-teach them to those three students, what do I do with the rest of my class for that half hour?

Rita discussed the time available during the plan period as not enough to address her responsibilities.

You only have one plan a day, and it's 30 minutes. By the time you drop your kids off and use the bathroom, you're down to 20 minutes. A parent phone call can last that long. So it's hard to get all that done, plus all your regular responsibilities, your grading, your lesson plans, and if you want to do a project, getting ready for it.

Fran stated that the minutes required for implementing interventions, while beneficial to the students receiving the interventions, were minutes she was not available to other students.

The disadvantage that I see in the classroom is, it's time consuming. While I'm sitting back with my little group doing RTI the other kids are doing worksheets or other things that sometimes I feel like I wish I had that teaching time back.

Cindy discussed the lack of time to collaborate, and used visual imagery to describe the cyclical nature of time issues.

We do get that half an hour plan time, and you don't even have time, you know, by the time you drop them off and go to the bathroom and check any emails and email back to parents, and get your afternoon set up, or get the next activity set up, you don't have the time to go in and say, "I'm really struggling, this kid is not getting what's going on." So most of those conversations take place before school, at lunch, or after school... Oh gosh, there's not enough, there's just never enough time in the day in my opinion and I feel like a hamster on a wheel.

Tanya spoke of what the students missed when they were pulled out of the classroom. Her concern was in finding time to make up the missed instruction.

Kids are pulled out for speech, pulled out for Power Reading and pulled out for social work. Some are just out of there so much that you feel like you're constantly playing catch up with them and are trying to get things done because they're missing so much

instruction, you know, some of it is they don't have the time that they need you know, they're getting some of the reading instruction in my room, but if they're missing Science quite a few times you have to try and re-teach it to them, but finding that kind of time is a little bit difficult.

Tanya also spoke to the lack of time for the students to express their creativity.

Because you have curriculum, you have kids you have to teach, and now you're trying to fit in this progress monitoring as well? And there's no time for the fun stuff like being creative and that gets pushed back, like making a project for mother's day, I like to fool around with technology and use Powerpoint, and just finding time to use Powerpoint, and just to find time is a full struggle... Well in a nice perfect world, I would love to do more creative stuff with the kids. In the district, we have a bunch of laptops and a digital camera; if the kids could work with this stuff we could use it for a science project, or math, I might have them take pictures of different types of angles have them put it into a Power Point presentation. I think it'd be nice to do more creative things like that, but those things take time, because you need to teach the programs, you need to teach them, you know any other things that go into it. I would like to do more things like that, but you have to make sure your main goal is to teach them what they need to know by the end of the year. You need to make sure they're getting the skills they need to move on. And computers aren't necessarily one of the skills, it's a lesson that I would like.

Faith, a part-time second grade teacher who shares an aide with another classroom teacher, discussed the challenges of time, particularly in balancing school time and family time.

It's very time consuming it takes up a lot of our day. Like I mentioned, I'm lucky to have a lot of support, so that makes it more tolerable and I still feel like I can get everything

accomplished, but it definitely does take a lot of extra time out of the day. I can imagine without any support that teachers would really feel that they weren't able to get everything done, unless you're staying really, really late every night or bringing all your work home, it is a lot. And being part time too I think that kind of changes my perspective because I do have a lot of time for my family and so the days that I'm here I will stay late and I'm here and I'm ready and I'm probably a lot more energetic than some teachers, because I'm only part time, you know, I'm willing to put the time in but, yeah, it's very time consuming, especially having this many students.

Participants spoke of the issue of time impacting collaboration, provision of interventions, preparation for meetings and class work, communication, making up missed work for students who leave the classroom, and balancing work and family time.

*Scheduling was very difficult.* Parallel to the theme of time is the theme of scheduling. The participants discussed grade level teachers working together to develop the year's schedule, scheduling interventions within the classroom, and scheduling grade level meetings. They also discussed the impact that scheduling has on curricular decisions.

Wendy discussed the impact of scheduling not just on the classroom teachers, but also for the support staff. She also discussed the question she asks regularly that arises from the scheduling concerns: when and how to make up the work missed by the student who leaves the room for an intervention or special education services.

So scheduling is always a nightmare and it's a nightmare for the Power Reading teachers. They don't want to take them during math, they don't want to take them during their real heavy instructional time, but they have to service all of us in the building, So I think it's more of a scheduling nightmare for them, but I also have to be in tune as to when my kids

are being pulled out and not just for RTI but for my IEP students as well. It's never convenient, and there's never going to be a convenient time. And so it's a constant battle, it's constant.

Rita described how the teachers at her grade level managed scheduling.

You have to make sure you're all doing Centers at exactly the same time, so when those kids go in, they're not disrupting the classroom. You end up redoing your schedule a million times at the beginning of the year.

Fran described a situation last year where she and another teacher exchanged students to provide the appropriate interventions.

Last year I did take two students from another teacher's classroom and pull them into my own classroom...I'd have the kids standing at my door or she'd have my kids standing at her door saying, "Well, here I am." Well, sometimes your schedule gets so crazy that it's three o'clock, oh my gosh!

Because classroom teachers had their specials scheduled at different times than the other grade level teachers, Cindy described that it was difficult for them to schedule intervention sharing.

So it's hard for us to do our RTI initiatives together because two of us have a special here, two of us have a special there, one of us has special in the afternoon, it just wasn't working. But we'll do some activities together, that all depends on who's working on what at the time, it's just the schedule, you just do the best you can.

Cindy went on to discuss the numerous decisions classroom teachers make that impact the delivery of instruction to students.

I don't know, I don't know in what subjects to take away any time where I could insert time, and the other thing is, with 26 kids, what am I doing with the other 23 if I want to

spend more time with these three? Or if I want these three pulled out to work on comprehension, it really has to be in that 20 minute time that I'm meeting with them in my reading group. Do I feel twenty minutes is enough? No. Do I wish someone else could come in? If I had to take it out, and this is horrible, but it would probably be during Social Studies or Science, because comprehension affects every single bit of your school day that I would really love for them to get more, and then I guess I have to rely on the support from home, to keep helping, to keep pushing it.

Zoe discussed weekly meetings held by third grade teachers in her building. Without having scheduled time to meet, the teachers conducted the meetings during lunch time.

So our third grade meetings are done at lunch, so we're eating, so you're doing it during your time. You do what you can during the day just to get it in.

Tanya spoke of the difficulty of maintaining a pre-determined schedule. She described the curricular choices she made as 'choosing her battles.'

I just think it's hard to stick to a schedule in third grade ... We have that schedule but we also need to be flexible with it. But then they throw in, you know, we have this coming up, or this, you know, it's this date and we have the library presentation to see, and you're kinda like, okay when am I gonna fit this now, and you're kinda moving everything all the time. And it's just hard to make sure you're meeting the kids to give them what they need, you're getting everything done that you need to get done, you're teaching them everything you want to teach them, and they're still trying to get through all the other curriculum. Science, Social Studies, and I think, in a lot of classrooms get pushed back more because you're making sure reading, math and writing gets strong, but then they're not getting as much Social Studies, so you kinda choose your battles..



Faith discussed scheduling her students with the intervention specialist during a time of the day when the students would not miss critical core curriculum presentations.

The beginning of the year was a little tricky, just kind of getting your time slot, because obviously I want my kids taken, if they're gonna be pulled, during handwriting, or maybe Science and Social Studies. I don't want them to miss reading or math, and all of us have reading at the same time, most of us have math at the same time.

The participants recognized the challenges of finding a workable, yet flexible schedule, while coordinating with colleagues for intervention implementation as well as expected and unexpected schedule changes. One teacher commented on the lack of time available for creativity in her classroom.

*Teachers expressed concern for students not receiving interventions.* The impact that RTI has in the classroom is not limited to the student receiving interventions, but rather RTI additionally impacts students who are not receiving interventions. While the participants described their unease with time and scheduling, they expressed concern over the students who were not receiving interventions.

Olivia, a second grade teacher, described the non-RTI student as the middle child who did not get as much attention as the other children.

There is the middle child syndrome too. And I always worry about that child...I was trying to do an intervention while the rest of my children were doing a reading activity, or a phonics activity, or part of the daily five, or whatever. I found that the other children, while I was working, doing an intervention at the back table with a small group, were always watching, or listening. I could tell they wanted to be a part of my group...“I'm

over here and I am working at my reading level, but I wonder what my teacher is doing over there with that group? I wish I could be back there.”...That has always bothered me. Wendy, also a second grade teacher, commented on the students who were not receiving RTI interventions. She discussed how second grade students search for teacher attention.

At times you can see that they’re searching for that attention from you too, because they notice that you’re working with some students a little bit more than them, so they are kind of searching for that attention. That’s the main thing I’ve noticed. They’re never complaining, and they’re always busy doing something while I’m working with the other students, but they just want that extra one-on-one time with you...They love working with you, so they want to work with you too.

Tanya discussed the impact on students who are not receiving interventions, and spoke specifically to her acknowledgement that she was providing the necessary interventions to the students who were struggling, but was not satisfied with the amount of time she provided to the students who did not receive interventions.

RTI focuses a lot on those lower kids and those lower kids take so much of your time...Some of the kids need your time for every assignment that you're trying to work on... There's not enough time, but you make time for those kids. It's those other kids that you're constantly trying to make sure you're getting time with, because time for the kids that are struggling and you're making time for them, you know that they need that intervention, you know that they need the extra longer than one hour instruction, so you make that time, and I think... it's necessary to make time for those kids more than the average kids, to make sure they're getting what they need...I felt like there's always a group missing out.

Vicky described students who were not receiving interventions as jealous.

My kids get jealous, you know, “Why is he getting to do this?”

Cindy discussed the inequality of time given to the students in her classroom.

When you have 26 kids in the classroom, sometimes I feel that each child should get 1/26th of your time, and I know I'm giving more time to the three that are on the tier 2.

Rita described the student who does not receive interventions and who wants attention in the form of a prize.

We do have one little kid who said, “How come I never get to go with such-and-such? I want to start getting toys!” So, occasionally, you do have a student who wants to start getting pulled out to earn a prize.

Sally described the desire of second graders to gain attention from the teacher.

Clearly they're not getting the one-on-one time with me. Only in second grade, actually, they really want that close, personal, daily time with you, as a teacher, as with me as a teacher.

As Nancy depicted the week as it pertained to the reading groups in her classroom, she described assignments of ‘busy work’ to students who did not receive interventions.

I think the kids that are high and above are the ones that I have to give busy work or things that I wouldn't necessarily give them if I didn't have to spend time with the lower group...I meet with those RTI kids all three days whereas the other two days I might meet with the average kids maybe one or two days and the high kids one day, but every day is with the RTI kids.

The participants stated that the impact of RTI in their classroom was beneficial to the students receiving interventions. They acknowledged that the time spent implementing the

interventions impacted more than just the students receiving interventions. Teachers expressed concern that the non-RTI students may experience feelings of being left out.

**Teachers experienced frustration and stress as they implemented RTI.**

Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) stated that frustration was to be viewed as a learning step in the process of change. They highlighted the frustration that can be experienced during the introduction of new classroom strategies and shared work demands among teachers, administration, and staff.

Participants spoke of feelings of stress and frustration as they portrayed situations they described as overwhelming. Participants identified stressors in the form of inadequate time, provision of numerous interventions, possible staff reduction for the following year, and the challenge of meeting the needs of each student in the classroom.

When asked about the impact that RTI had in her classroom, Wendy described finding time to implement the interventions as overwhelming and stressful.

For myself, the impact has been a little overwhelming. It's a lot of work for the teacher to kind of fit in, when students have a lot of interventions. And most likely those kids that are struggling are going to have one or two interventions that need to be done and that is, at times, a little overwhelming because we have to find time for them to make up the other work that they are missing. So that is my stress.

Cindy expressed concern for being able to adequately meet the needs of all her students while differentiating for the individual needs of the students.

And so when you differentiate, which is what's expected from us in the classroom, and now I have to differentiate for them, differentiate for my high, and then reach my middle,

and when we have to teach six to seven subjects a day, and you're trying to get engaged learning, and the strategies met, it becomes a lot, it does, it becomes a lot.

Ada discussed the willingness of the classroom teachers to reach out to students, and described the frustration that they experience with the limited time in the school day.

It's hard, and by no means is it that we don't want to help these children, we do and that's the frustrating part, we want to help them to be successful, we want to be there for them, but we only have so many hands and so many opportunities and time in the day to do what we need to do. It's hard, it's really frustrating.

Ada also referred to her classroom responsibilities as a full plate.

As a classroom teacher, our plate is full already and now we have these students who we have to assess or work with in small groups even more often than we already were...Something's got to give.

Olivia spoke of the stress of reaching the needs of each student in her classroom.

It definitely adds a little more stress to my day. Definitely, trying to fit in, is huge, feeling like 'Who am I missing? Who am I leaving behind? Who am I not getting to?'

Olivia also stated her concerns with a suspected staff reduction for the next school year affecting her role at RTI implementer.

Next year we are going from three resource teachers in our building to two. That's very frightening. I do have a significant number of my RTI children who are being pulled for interventions. It's frightening to think that I might be responsible for providing all the interventions myself.

Vicky expressed her frustration with running out of options to help a student.

When you're sitting there with your mountain of folders and going, "I have no idea what else to do anymore for this child," and it can be frustrating.

Faith summed up conversations she has had with other teachers.

I know some teachers feel very overwhelmed with getting through the day as it is, and I think they feel really stressed and overwhelmed and they look at it as not really a positive thing.

Sally summed up her experience with RTI using visual imagery and stated that RTI is not easy.

It's not all rainbows and butterflies, it's not the easiest thing I've ever had to do.

The implementation of RTI sparked emotional reactions from the participants. They acknowledged the stress and frustration that arose from their attempts to reach the needs of their students. They stated a desire to help each student, and responded emotionally with their struggle to provide for the individual needs of the students.

As the participants spoke of the impact of RTI on themselves, they addressed the topics of professional development, adjusting the school day to coordinate all required elements, available resources, and the impact of stress and frustration. The participants also discussed the impact of RTI on their students.

When participants discussed the impact of RTI on students as they perceived it, four themes emerged. These themes discuss the reactions of students receiving the interventions and reactions from parents. The teachers discussed the role of data-based decision-making and the role of classroom observation. Finally, the teachers commented on the length of time involved in data collection and intervention implementation.

### **The students liked receiving interventions.**

When asked about the students' reactions to receiving interventions, the participants replied that the response was favorable. Rita described the positive student reaction to receiving interventions. She attributed the positive response of the students to the small-group setting which allowed issues of attention to be addressed.

They like it. They like it because these are kids that a lot of times do better in settings that's in a small group, it's easier for them to concentrate. I know my reading group, and my AD/HD boy, and my little girl that's got some attention issues too, they do so much better because the whole class isn't around and asking questions kind of thing. So from a student perspective, I would think they would say, "Oh, I get to go out with such and such and work on reading, or work on math, I get to practice, and get some kind of reward, a sticker or a prize." So they see it as leaving the room for a little bit to get a little bit extra help.

Zoe described the student who receives interventions in the classroom, and discussed his improved performance because he was not taken out of the classroom.

I've done Read Naturally with the student that didn't want to leave the classroom, and then working through it in the classroom, and then they would do it independently now, and before it wasn't very well received, because he was taken out...In a classroom he felt more comfortable. Overall, the students, they just have more of a comfort zone.

Ellen spoke of her second grade students who enjoyed working in the hallway for supplemental math instruction.

I have three students who get a re-teach in math every afternoon and they really like working in that small group...They kind of see it was a reward almost like, and my

classroom aide really makes it fun and she has like this incentive sticker chart that they earn when they've mastered a skill, and they're more accountable for their learning and they're a little competitive too so you want to do that, so they see it as a positive experience as do I.

Faith commented on the students' warm responses to the extra help and the individual attention.

They seem to look forward to it, I think they like a different teacher, they try and make it fun, it's usually a short amount of time and then they come back and just kind of jump right in with what we're doing, so, I never had any students who seemed to resist it. They seem to, I think they like the attention, they like the extra help, they like the small group and I think it makes them feel good because those teachers usually give lots of praise, and they're high energy and they can really focus on the students so, they seem to all enjoy it.

Olivia spoke of the students' reactions to getting extra help.

For the most part the children loved it.

Two participants discussed the use of data to drive student motivation. Wendy described the data that are shared with the students, and discussed how data can drive student motivation.

The Read Naturally intervention has a graph portion to it. Each time we read we do a cold read and a hot read. So we do a cold read, and we'll graph it up, and this goes for how many words they know, so they can see how they did on their cold read. And then we graph a hot read on the top so they can see how much they have improved. We do that all together, so they can see their rate of improvement. I think that really motivates them for the next time to read better. "I want to get my bar graph up higher!" They do get really motivated, which is wonderful.



Fran also spoke of the way she discussed progress with the students and how she involved the students with the charting process.

I make my kids very well aware why we're doing Six Minute Solutions, “We started at this number and my goal is for you to move to here.” We have a little tracking chart, they color it in themselves, they like to see the line moving up.

Participants described students as ready and willing to partake in the interventions. Interventions were implemented in numerous settings and by a variety of support staff and the students responded well to the routine. Also, two teachers who discussed progress directly with their students commented on increased motivation.

#### **Data collection interfered with the teaching of reading.**

A component of RTI is universal screening to identify students at-risk for school failure. Ideally, data from this screening are used to determine the research-based instruction provided to at-risk students (Schapiro & Clemens, 2009). The data generated by the screening process may provide critical information that the general education teacher can use to provide interventions in a timely and effective manner (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005). Deno et al. (2009) discussed collection of screening data for all students three times during the school year. Students identified through this process may then be monitored on a frequent basis to determine the effectiveness of instruction and/or interventions. Using assessment data to determine instruction is a formative process. By addressing general education instruction, RTI offers the promise of providing data to enrich the instruction in the general education classroom (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2005; Vaughn, 2005).

The participants in this study discussed the role of data collection in instructional decision-making. Participants discussed AIMSweb, the screening tool used by the district for

both collecting data in the area of reading, and identifying students to receive interventions. Their concerns were that AIMSweb focused strictly on one area of reading, fluency. They also expressed concern that the limited use of fluency data proved inadequate for instructional decision-making.

Rita described the process for determining which students were qualified to receive interventions based on AIMSweb data. She expressed concern that the focus on fluency did not consider student progress in the area of reading comprehension.

I do find that is the one fault with just using a fluency score, because reading is not just about fluency, and you do have to comprehend. When they read the reading passage all that you're doing is that you're setting the timer for 60 seconds to see how many words they can read in 60 seconds. You do that three times and you take the median score. So you're never asking them, "Well, what happened in the story?" And you always have those kids who can read every word on the page but have no clue what they just read.

AIMSweb is just fluency.

Wendy spoke of the automatic placement into tier 2 for a child who falls below the 25% on the AIMSweb screening.

We do an AIMSweb reading test that is for fluency. We see how many words they can read in a minute. They have to meet a certain number. We do it three times a year. If they don't meet a certain number, those kids most likely go into Power Reading, and that is considered tier 2.

Olivia named AIMSweb as the screening tool of choice for the district.

AIMS is the screening we use the most.

She then went on to describe a student who received interventions based on her AIMSweb scores.

She's made wonderful gains in fluency, but not in comprehension.

Sally also identified the area of reading comprehension that is missing with the AIMSweb screening tool.

We give the AIMSweb assessment, it's straight fluency, it does not incorporate comprehension, which, I would like to see a comprehension piece.

When asked if she used screening tools for determining instruction, Terri stated that she did use data produced by AIMSweb, and described its limitation.

Oh definitely... we do use a screening tool to kinda determine the intervention...

AIMSweb, honestly, is just for fluency.

Fran discussed how a low AIMSweb score may keep students from other reading lessons.

So that's a struggle too because I'm pulling them away from their language activities to do the fluency which they have to do because they have to work on fluency.

Fran also discussed the relatively new emphasis on fluency due to AIMSweb.

I've taught for 21 years and no one has ever directed me so much on what I can do to help a child improve in fluency.

Cindy described a fluency intervention a student received based on her AIMSweb score.

They keep reading each day that exact same read and she charts their progress throughout the week to make sure that it's going up and that's working on fluency alone.

Ellen described the limited focus of the AIMSweb screening.

AIMS is just the fluency aspect.

The teachers initially responded that the topic of data-based decision-making was synonymous with the administration of AIMSweb. Participants agreed that the data provided through AIMSweb did not address areas of reading other than fluency. While participants used the data to select interventions to address fluency, they questioned its use.

Although students who are determined to receive interventions can be identified through a screening process, the participants explained that the teachers also rely on their classroom observations. As AIMSweb was the screening tool used to identify students for RTI interventions, the participants identified its limited assistance with classroom decision-making.

**Rather than rely solely on standardized assessments, teachers trusted their own observations of classroom performance to identify students who need attention.**

Rather than relying strictly on data provided through a screening tool, teachers acknowledged that they recognized students who required attention based on classroom performance and teacher observation. Participants used their own collection of data separate from standardized measurements to determine which students needed additional attention. Participants identified that RTI may begin with the classroom teacher's observation of a student who is struggling. Teachers stated that they often began by discussing the student's progress informally with other teachers at their grade level as well as with the teacher who had the student during the previous school year, then initiated changes to address the needs of the student.

Sally described a student who was identified through her classroom observations and how she began addressing the needs of the student.

I've got a tier 1 student. I'm noticing things, I'm thinking, this child needs more help.

They're not reading where they should be...Let's do this for him, let's do that for him.

Cindy described looking for a pattern of struggles that a student may exhibit, and responding with classroom changes to meet the student's needs.

When we see a child that is struggling, be it reading, math, and not just struggling for one day, but we see a pattern forming, then we start looking at that child...Let's start her with this and see where she goes from there.

Terri observed how a student might be struggling and could benefit from attention.

So it starts off like general education, you go through, and if you can see that they're kind of floundering a little bit or they might need some modifications or adaptations.

Olivia summed up the initial steps in the RTI process as supportive and collaborative as she discussed ideas for working with the student in her classroom with the grade level teachers.

I will identify the problems the child is having. We will brainstorm and kick around some ideas. I will then go back and try those ideas for a while.

Nancy, when she observed a student who was struggling, discussed how she approached the student's previous teacher with a question.

Then if I have questions I would go to their first grade teacher and say, "He is really having a hard time with comprehension. What kinds of things did you do?" That kind of thing.

Wendy described reaching out to help students she observed struggling in the classroom as 'catching them' and identified problem-solving as an initial step.

Were catching them, we're trying to solve the problems, were helping them.

Faith discussed a student who transferred into the district who was identified very early on as a student with academic needs, and described the support staff who interacted with the student.

We've got a little guy, he came to us this year, from another district, no IEP, didn't come with anything, and we knew two, three days in that he was probably at least a full year behind the rest of the kids... He worked with our resource teacher, we also did some language testing with our speech therapist and I know I did, I think a screen on him for social work. He really needed the support.

When asked if she used data provided through the screenings to determine instruction, Rita spoke of the use of classroom observations.

Really you just use your observations you make on their classroom work for their phonics and their comprehension.

Participants discussed the RTI process as beginning with classroom teacher observation followed by informal grade level team discussions which offered recommendations of specific interventions. Participants did not rely strictly on the data produced by AIMSweb to determine who would receive interventions, or what specific interventions would be utilized with the students. They discussed their observations with other teachers to determine the next steps.

**The teachers described data collection and intervention implementation as a lengthy process.**

An issue discussed by the participants was the timeline for collecting data and implementing interventions. Although the *Guide* distributed by the district stated that the tier 1 interventions were to be implemented for a period of four - eight weeks, the teachers regularly referred to 18 interventions, which they described as one intervention implemented three times a week over the course of six weeks. The six weeks required to implement the 18 interventions caused concern for some participants, particularly when the six weeks were interrupted with holidays, vacation days, and school activities. Some participants referred to their own

observations as more useful in determining the effectiveness of an intervention, and stated they did not need six weeks of collecting data of an intervention to make that determination.

Nancy discussed her concern about RTI delaying appropriate help for students who are struggling.

I think that it just seems like a very long time. Some of us have been teaching a longer time and have seen, not that we know everything, or anything like that, I don't want to give you that impression, but for those of us who have seen these kids know this, like, yeah, ok this might work and you just know that this child is you know, really struggling and you don't think it's going to be very effective in six weeks and it's like you just want to keep on moving because you feel like, you don't want to say you wasted that precious time but maybe they could have gotten more one-on-one help. And that one-on-one help doesn't come until tier 3.

Fran maintained that the timeline for RTI may be a disadvantage for some students.

There was a student I had last year that I fought for him because I knew it was more, and because he kept improving, they wouldn't test him, and I kept saying, "We're losing him, we're losing him." Turned out in fourth grade he was tested and found to have a learning disability, so I felt like with him, because we saw improvement, but again, he spent more than half of his day in interventions, of course he's going to improve, so, I don't know, it's a case, by case thing...the idea is that we know these kids better than a piece of paper knows these kids.

Sally acknowledged the past tendency to over-qualify students for special education, but questioned if the RTI process worked quickly enough to find a student eligible.

We were over-qualifying for special ed. Now though it seems, like I said, there were kids that you know are eligible, “I have been doing this, and doing this, and doing this. Is he going to be tested this year?” “No.” “Ok, promise me next year?” “Yeah, well, we've got all your data, we've got to keep collecting the data.” So, I would like to see those cases pushed through a little quicker, you know. Those ones that you know in your heart and soul...let's do something before he falls too far behind.

Sally continued to question the length of time required to collect an appropriate amount of data to make an RTI decision.

A negative thing about RTI is there are those kids where I will bet my hands on it, “Please, just test, they're going to qualify.” They need data, which I understand, you know, I do understand, I get it, but you just want these kids to succeed and you know you're giving it your all, then you start questioning yourself, I know I have. Am I using the best teaching strategy? Am I a crappy teacher, like what is going to happen? You start questioning yourself and they're still not succeeding, I have done everything that I could possibly do.

Nancy stated that the process of collecting data to determine appropriate interventions was a lengthy process that was interrupted with incomplete weeks of school.

Say for example we're doing progress monitoring, which goes in with the reading, and you check their fluency and so forth every other week, and if you're doing this for a six week period then you only have three points of data for that because you're doing it every other week. For the six weeks you are just monitoring, you are trying to implement the strategies that were talked about...but it's the six weeks where you're really monitoring it and you don't really have a normal six weeks of full weeks of school so I think that's part



of the reason it's such a long period of time because it's not six complete weeks, five days a week, and then during that time we keep track, we write notes, and contact parents, and talk about how things are going and then we meet again after the six weeks and decide, should we stay the course with this, or should we go back and do something different and try something else for the next six or eight weeks.

Nancy was concerned that the 'wait to fail' model still existed with RTI as she stated that the time given to determine whether an intervention was successful was too long. Nancy discussed shortening the length of time an intervention is implemented before reviewing whether a student has made progress.

It seems like we do interventions for six weeks, but it just seems like that's a long time in between, it seems like we need to come back sooner like maybe in three weeks because six weeks is such a long time. If it's not working at all, you're wasting six weeks. For every six weeks that you try something new, the year is half over and you really haven't found an intervention that really works with them.

Rita questioned whether the RTI process was an improved way of identifying a student for special education eligibility.

Until they go through their six weeks of interventions, and then tweaking it, and then six more weeks, by the time those six weeks add up, they have already gone to the next grade. In the older grades, they've already been through the interventions, "We tried it for six weeks, it didn't work. We tried it six more weeks, it didn't work." So that has already been done in kindergarten, first grade, and second grade.

Rita went on to discuss the steps when she brings a student's name to Grade Level Assistance Team (GLAT).

They would say, “It’s early in the year, let’s implement this, this, and this.” You would implement that for six weeks, and then you would meet again. If you meet again in six weeks and there is no progress and you still have concerns you sit down again and talk about what else can we do, what’s working, what’s not working, and again the cycle goes on and on. We don’t really get anywhere in first or second grade, it usually takes until third grade to actually have something done.

Rita expressed her disappointment that in order to address an academic issue with a student, she had to rely on data points.

We’re with them every day for six hours a day. So it’s kind of hard to sit in meeting and hear, “Well, you don’t have enough points on this graph to show their going down.” And I say, “I am with them every day, I know what’s going on, I know there’s something there.”

Vicky expressed concern that some students continued to receive interventions in the tiers rather than moving them towards an appropriate special education placement in a more efficient manner.

I’m very frustrated to see that for some kids, it just seems like we’re moving them along and we’re not doing what we need to do to reach them and when I have a kid who has been on tier 3 in first grade and I thought that after 18 interventions we were supposed to be doing something else, and nothing’s happening, there’s nothing else I can do for this child. He’s been on tier 3 since first grade, and still on tier 3 in second grade. By third grade we need to be doing something else and I don’t get any answers, and I’ve had two like that, one of them we are going to possibly see if she is eligible for an IEP, but now

it's the end of third grade, what are we doing for her? Sometimes I feel sad because I think we've done a disservice.

Vicky went on to discuss the 60-day time period for testing.

One of my biggest frustrations is if we do all these interventions, and she's been on tier 3 now since first grade, and you have all acknowledged that we should consider doing an eligibility for the IEP and we brought the parents in on this in February, why do we still have to wait 60 days, because by law you get 60 days to test. If you don't test anymore because you have the RTI data, why are we waiting 60 days for her next meeting? Sixty school days, so that's 60 more days that were wasted for this kid, nobody pulled any tests yet, nobody came and did an observation until yesterday. What was happening in that 60 days that we weren't doing something else for this child? Why do we have to wait?

We've acknowledged, we've had the parents here, why? Because the law says you get 60 days? I don't understand that, the law says yes, we get 60 days, but, if we're not testing, because we have this pile of data, why weren't we doing something then for her?

Ada discussed a student who remained in tier 3 throughout the school year. She questioned if the interventions provided to the student were appropriate.

It was the beginning of this year, she was a tier 3, labeled tier 3 in RTI. She really struggled with reading and, actually, phonics...As her classroom teacher, I was supposed to pull her to the back room, a back table, small group once a week. But here I am at the end of the year going, "OK, did we do the right thing? Did she get what she needed? Is that what I was supposed to do? So did it work? Did it help her? Did we do the right thing? Do we have the right resources?" I don't know.

Participants stated that their years of experience in the classroom led them to identify how effectively an intervention would address student progress at a faster rate than the timeline of intervention implementation determined by the district. This observation led the participants to question the timeliness of the RTI process as it impacted special education eligibility determination.

The 11 themes that emerged from this study addressed the knowledge and perceptions of second and third grade teachers as they implemented RTI. The knowledge themes focused on the how teachers explained RTI and what they saw as the purpose of RTI. The perception themes discussed the impact of RTI on themselves and on their students.

**Individual participants presented noteworthy topics.**

While there was agreement among the majority of participants in the above areas of discussion, some participants singled themselves out for various reasons, and I will highlight those who did by providing interesting and unique perceptions worth noting. This segment will present participants who strayed from the group, or discussed a topic related to the literature.

Sally was the participant who had recently received her Type 75 certification. She presented herself as a problem-solver and her approach to RTI reflected this. While she agreed with the other participants in many areas, she disagreed with the participants in the themes of struggling to fit everything in and professional development. Sally described herself as a highly qualified teacher and said that implementing RTI in her classroom was feasible.

I like to think that I'm a highly qualified teacher, I like to think that I'm using the best teaching strategies that I know how...I think that the way I run RTI in my classroom is definitely doable.

Sally preferred to implement the interventions herself, rather than have her students pulled out for the interventions.

That's giving up the ownership, I don't want you pulling my four kids who need phonemic awareness, I don't want you pulling them, I will make it work in my classroom, I will pull them, I want to be the one responsible for keeping the data, charting the progress, charting growth.

Sally described the system she developed for assuring that students would receive the interventions.

It's a set rotation: read to someone, read to self, listening, work on writing and word work...What I have done is I have taken myself out of the first rotation, during that first rotation I have found, just messing with it, I found what works best for me is that whole first rotation, I got my whole class out doing their five different things, I don't pull a guided reading group, I sit out of that one, I do my interventions, and get my binder out, I've got it all organized, each student that I meet. So I have found a way to make it work and it works well, I miss one guided reading group, so instead of getting five reading groups a day I get four, because it enables me to get those interventions that I have to get in.

Sally spoke to the comments she heard from other teachers regarding the issue of time and described how her set rotation schedule addressed that issue in her classroom.

It's what teachers always complain about, time, time, time, and, "Oh I've got more stuff to do." That's all they complain about. I'm one of them too, so. I did find a way that works for me, and knock on wood, it hasn't come to a point yet where it hasn't worked, I had just taken myself out of that first rotation. Negative, because I didn't get to meet with all

those groups, but one way that I could fix that and one way that I have fixed that is that my higher reading kids, the ones that are reading at a third, fourth, fifth grade level, they get chapter books, so I'm not going to meet with you on Tuesday, I'll meet with you first on Wednesday though and I want you to keep notes and make connections. It works, it works for me so far, I haven't come to the point where my teacher perspective went, oh, I don't have time, I can't get it done. I've made it happen.

Regarding professional development, Sally did attend the optional training sessions offered by the district and found them valuable.

We were given the opportunity, it was not mandatory, when we were first hearing this, RTI, we were given the opportunity, our school district used to offer courses for us to take and we'd either get CPDU's or stipends to attend these courses...One of the things we could go to was, RTI what is it. And it was at the district office, I want to say it was three or four courses, three or four times we had to go in for a couple of hours and our PPS Director was the one who was running it and our Associate Superintendent was there and our Superintendent was there. The room was packed. It wasn't mandatory, I did choose to take part in it and a couple of my other girlfriends here chose to take part in it. It was the best decision we made because we kept hearing from our principal, from media, from wherever we would turn we heard: RTI, RTI, RTI is coming. We're like: I don't even know what it stands for, do you know what I mean? So I'm like, I better hightail it over to the district office and find out what it is. It was a good showing, it definitely was which I thought said a lot for our school district too. The teachers knew it was coming, they wanted to be as best informed as they could be...But it was like I said, it was voluntary if you wanted to, come, which I took advantage of it.

When asked if she would like additional training, Sally stated that she did not think it was necessary.

I don't think so, I think with the materials that we have because knowing that they are there, when they were coming I kind of grabbed them, my RTI folder, I started looking through some of the stuff. We have some of the stuff, some of the stuff that I was reading through, like packets, an inch thick, that, wow, like, this is interesting information and not stuff that I didn't necessarily know, it wasn't anything new to me but it was, wow, a refresher.

Sally, a teacher with Type 75 Certification who described herself as highly qualified, diverged with participants in the areas of professional development and the impact of time and scheduling in her classroom. She developed her own way of addressing the implementation of interventions in her classroom and expressed satisfaction that her system met the needs of students requiring interventions.

As Sally expressed ideas contrary to other participants, the two teachers with backgrounds in special education, Ellen and Faith, also articulated opinions which were in marked contrast with the other participants when discussing the length of time required for data collection and intervention implementation. They observed the timeline of the RTI process as an improvement over the ability/achievement discrepancy.

Faith, a teacher eligible for LBS1 certification, compared the RTI process with the previous eligibility process.

In the past when we didn't have RTI, we would try to get a kid tested, but that would be difficult, sometimes you have to really let them drop and fail before you could get them

tested and get them help...Now we can help the kids before things get really rough, so, and I've seen my kids make big gains, they're doing better.

Faith went on to discuss the ability/achievement discrepancy that was required for a student to demonstrate eligibility to receive special education services. She also described the RTI timeline as an opportunity for collecting an increased amount of data, and maintained that the RTI process proved timelier than the ability/achievement discrepancy process.

It looks a lot different now and we're all kind of still getting used to it. In fact, for years... you had to always show a discrepancy for students to get special ed services, so their I.Q. and their achievement, there had to be a big enough discrepancy that they were qualifying. Sometimes kids, you just could see it in their habits, that they may have something going on with them, but that they didn't act the way they should have acted, they didn't qualify. So before...we would collab and try to come up with some ideas, but the whole process took a really long time, and it was kind of vague at times. Where now we start with tier 2 of course, we start progress monitoring the minute we start bringing in the interventions, and now we have a lot more data and if you know a kid is needing more support we can probably get them there a little bit quicker. I know with my student for example, when we met with mom and the principal, she said, "Let's do some progress monitoring, let's give it six weeks, and if in six weeks we are still seeing, you know or even a decrease, we need to push for testing right away." So we have a little more freedom now to get kids enrolled quicker, we need to, we have more data which is helpful too, so for parents, there's something that we can be doing in the meantime, the progress monitoring, where before we were kind of just kinda sending them for testing, it will be a couple months, and now kids are qualified, and sometimes you just know in



your heart, just because I have a special ed background, that's like a LD kinda student and I could just see it in them, that they didn't always qualify, and then you'd feel disappointed by that.

Faith went on to provide an example of a student who moved through the eligibility process at a pace quicker than what she had previously experienced.

He kind of went from tier 1 to tier 3 in the school year, which is pretty fast since it tends to take a year or two, but he really needed the support and I think he's now in a good place.

Ellen, an LBS1 certified general education teacher, agreed that RTI improved the process of special education eligibility.

It kind of makes sure that everyone is taking the right steps, and not just jumping to the testing. I had a few kiddo's who I found in the beginning were, oh yeah, they're definitely going to qualify, and after they had those more intense interventions, they have made great progress, so it just kind of makes sure that everyone is taking the right steps and no one is jumping to conclusions.

Ellen went on to explain that the six to eight weeks of interventions are necessary to determine effectiveness.

We monitor them and keep a close eye on them and after six to eight weeks, if they're not making the progress and closing that gap that we'd like to see then we might change the intervention or we might add an additional one and then if we add an additional one, depending on the minutes, or how many times they're receiving those services throughout the week, we'll plan on a tier 3 or tier 2. So it kind of depends on the student, if we want to, you know, change up interventions, if we, you know, find the best one for them, let's

try something else, or we might add an additional one on top of that one, but we always wait six to eight weeks, to let that kind of set in.

Participants expressed two views on the timeline of RTI. While most participants expressed disappointment with the length of time required to make changes in a student's intervention plan, the two teachers with a special education background identified reasons why the RTI process was an improvement over the ability/achievement discrepancy process.

The literature speaks specifically importance of reflection time for teachers when introducing a new initiative. Fullan (2007) stated that one of the main barriers to successful change was lack of time to reflect on the new practice. Sustainability of change calls for regular reflection about new practices. (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

Two participants stated specifically that the opportunity to participate in this study provided reflection time to them that did not exist during the school year. Both participants shared their comments during the follow-up phone interviews that occurred during the summer.

Olivia commented that participating in the study was the first occasion she had to share her opinion, and that she was appreciative of the opportunity.

When I started talking with you I thought, "Oh my goodness this is the first time I have to talk about this. And to vent, well not vent but to share, or give somebody my opinion."

So I welcomed that.

Faith agreed that she also welcomed the opportunity to reflect.

It's been kind of a nice reflective process for me, because I read through the transcript this week and it was kind of neat to think back about it. I thought it was good reflection for me. I don't take time during the school year to really think about RTI and it was nice to read through what I said about it. It made me really think about it.

While the literature states the importance of reflection when introducing a new initiative, the teachers did not use time during the school year for the reflective process. Participants who acknowledged that participation in the study allowed for reflection were appreciative of the opportunity.

## **Conclusion**

As RTI is provided to students requiring attention within the realm of the general education classroom, it provides the opportunity to evaluate and address the needs of all students (Shapiro & Clemens, 2009). The knowledge and perceptions of general education teachers concerning RTI included findings in the areas of explanation and purpose of RTI, and the impact on classroom teachers and students. The final chapter, Chapter V, will present an interpretation of the findings, discuss implications of this study as well as study limitations, and offer suggestions for future research.

## **Chapter V**

### **DISCUSSION**

While current research exists in a variety of areas of RTI, the focus is fairly limited (Kratchowill et al., 2007). Research on the general education teacher is lacking in portraying the viewpoint of the classroom teacher. The purpose of this descriptive case study was to obtain the viewpoints of general education teachers concerning RTI. Chapter IV divided the emergent themes into two sections. The first section of Chapter IV, the knowledge of the participants concerning RTI, revealed two themes of explaining RTI and discussing its purpose. The second section of Chapter IV, the perceptions of the general education teachers concerning RTI, revealed eight themes which discussed the impact on the classroom teacher and the impact on the students.

#### **Summary of Study**

Using qualitative interviewing, this descriptive case study sought to gain the knowledge and perceptions of second and third grade teachers who were in the third year of implementing RTI. The study aimed to deepen the knowledge and awareness of the RTI experience of teachers in one school district. Through the process of interviewing, the perspectives of the participants determined the heart of the research. The depth of description provided through this qualitative research allows the reader an opportunity to feel what is happening in the general education teacher's professional life.

A descriptive case study was the chosen method as it provides insight and discovery that lead to interpretation (Merriam, 1998). Descriptive characteristics lend themselves to rich, thick descriptions of a specific phenomenon. These descriptions include the intricacies of the phenomenon by presenting viewpoints from a new perspective. Heuristic characteristics expand

understanding of a phenomenon. As groundbreaking implementers of a new program, classroom teachers, through interviews, provided their viewpoints to expand the current understanding of the phenomenon of RTI.

Chapter I introduced an overview of RTI and presented the problem statement: The limited research on RTI is lacking the viewpoint of the general education teacher. Chapter II included an exploration of the literature on RTI and on school change. Chapter III explained the study design and methods, as well as an explanation of the data collection and analysis procedures. Chapter IV presented the results and analysis based on the data collected during this study. Codes were assigned, reduced and reassigned. Themes emerged and participant responses were matched to themes. Through this process, the knowledge and perceptions of the general education teachers surfaced. Chapter V includes a discussion of the findings, limitations of the study, implications of the study, and suggestions for further research.

### **Central Categories**

As the research on RTI grows, attention should be paid to the perspective of the general education teacher. Macheck and Nelson (2007), in a survey of the role of the school psychologist, discussed the importance of identifying the attitudes and perceptions of all workers in the school setting. The research, however, is scant in addressing the observations and insights of the primary implementers of RTI and those with a unique insider's perspective, the classroom teachers.

### **Discussion of Findings**

To expose the viewpoints of the general education teacher, I explored the themes and findings that emerged from the study. Two central categories surfaced: 1) Teachers are

committed to attending to the academic needs of students at the individual level; and 2) Teachers rely on each other. Chapter V continues with a discussion of these central categories.

**Teachers are committed to attending to the academic needs of students at the individual level.**

In examining the findings, the overarching message from the teachers is that they are concerned with and reach out to students at the individual level. Beginning with their discussion of the purpose of RTI, participants described their attention to the individual student. Mellard et al. (2004) discussed the motivation of classroom teachers to provide services to students who they observed needed them the most. As Shirley (2009) stated, in the effort to initiate school change, the first step is to ensure that the change is ultimately aimed at improving student learning. The participants stated unabashedly that improved student learning was the purpose of RTI, and that the efforts of the teachers were at the individual level of the student.

Researchers have described RTI as a general education initiative that provides multitier interventions that are research-based, rigorously implemented with fidelity for a prescribed time period, closely monitored using data-based decision processes, and designed to provide appropriate learning experiences for all students (e. g., Bradley et al., 2005; Glover et al.2007; Shapiro & Clemens, 2009).

In explaining RTI, rather than focusing on the components of RTI as described in the literature, the teachers spoke of the student who was not successful, and they described their role in RTI was to meet the needs of that student. They described RTI as a safety net to help the child who needs it. They spoke of one-on-one instruction. They spoke of the students they wanted to keep an eye on, to identify in the early grades, the student who required extra attention. Their

explanation did not identify the various components of RTI, but rather identified the struggling student who was the recipient of RTI.

Sugai and Horner (2009) identified the purposes of RTI as a universal screening of students resulting in improved outcomes for students with learning disabilities, and a system of supports for improving not only the implementation of interventions, but also general education instructional decision-making for all students.

In describing the purpose of RTI, the teachers spoke of the student who was struggling, the student who needed remediation, the student who was falling behind, the student who needed an extra boost. They spoke of their desire to help that student, and how they, as teachers, provided extra support, both in the areas of academics and behavior. They described the purpose of RTI was to reach students before they might need special education services. The teachers included comments about the components of universal screening, fidelity to interventions, and progress monitoring, but centered their discussion on the individual student.

Attempts to improve instruction do not always take into account the social context of the classroom. When teachers have little control over what is taught they tend to have feelings of powerlessness. As demands are imposed on teachers, new pressures are forced upon them. When the change reduces time for planning and collaboration, there is added pressure (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996). As change is guided by student improvement, change happens when it influences the conditions directly impacting teachers' work to advance student learning (Bryk et al., 2010).

When the teachers described their challenge to fit everything in, three areas were discussed by the teachers: time, scheduling and students who did not receive interventions. All three areas addressed the teachers' commitment to meet the needs of the individual students.

Fitting the interventions into the school day proved to be problematic for the teachers. They discussed lack of time to collaborate about a student who was struggling. They questioned the curricular decisions they made when it was necessary for a student to make up a missed lesson. They spoke of the students who were not receiving their attention when they were implementing interventions. The teachers' comments reflected the conflict they felt as they met the requirements imposed on them.

Fullan and Hargreaves (2009) stated that the vision of educational reform is to address inequalities in schools. Participants raised the possibility that RTI was actually generating an inequality. They referred to this inequality as the middle child syndrome. Participants quoted what they believed were a child's thoughts while being left out of the group. They described the jealous student, and also voiced what that child was thinking. They spoke of assigning busy work while they implemented interventions. As they observed second and third grade students longing to spend more time with their teachers, they raised doubts as to the fairness of the initiative.

Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) discussed the many strategies that not only fail to motivate teachers for effective implementation of the change but actually alienate them in the process. When teachers have an emotional reaction to a school initiative, it impacts the implementation of that initiative.

The teachers described an educational climate that bred frustration and stress. They spoke of their desire to help the students derailed by the restrictions imposed by time and schedules. They questioned their ability to address the needs of each student because of the conflicts they experienced daily. They used the words stressed, frustrated and overwhelmed to describe the emotional impact that affected them personally.



When the participants discussed the students' reactions to RTI as positive, they spoke of individual students. They mentioned the boy with AD/HD, the child who did not like to leave the classroom, the girl with attention issues, the student who likes to get stickers. They voiced the student's response to interventions as seeing it as a reward, liking the attention. They described their students as responding well to the attention and as a result, they saw individual students making progress.

Fullan (2007) identified measurement and monitoring systems that preoccupy implementers as a main barrier to successful change. A component of RTI is universal screening to identify students at-risk for school failure. Ideally, data from this screening are used to determine the research-based instruction provided to at-risk students (Schapiro & Clemens, 2009).

The use of AIMSweb as a screening tool interfered with the teaching of reading as it focused only on the fluency component of reading. Teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the limited use of AIMSweb and discussed the student who was making no progress in comprehension while addressing fluency. They spoke of the student being pulled away from other language arts activities in order to address fluency. They spoke specifically of the lack of a screening tool to identify a weakness in the area of comprehension.

Teachers reacted to their disappointment with the limitations of the screening tool by trusting their own observations of student progress. They spoke of the observations they made in the areas of comprehension and phonics, and described how they implemented adaptations and modifications for them. They described catching students, solving problems, collaborating with other teachers to provide what the students needed.

In the process of following the district guidelines for implementing interventions for six-eight weeks, the teachers expressed their concern that it took too long for students to get the appropriate help. Wanzek and Vaughn (2008) discussed the amount of time required to consider interventions effective. The researchers examined two groups of first grade students demonstrating low levels of reading despite previous interventions. Students were divided into three groups that received a single dose of intervention, a double dose of interventions, or no intervention. Findings indicated that doubling the intensity of the intervention did not seem to increase the number of students that responded to the interventions. However students who did receive interventions showed more progress than students who received no interventions. The researchers questioned whether the amount of time, ten weeks, was significantly long enough for the students to respond to the interventions.

The teachers questioned if the '18 interventions' (three interventions per week over the course of six weeks) were necessary before determining the effectiveness of an intervention. They stated that their own observations were sufficient for making a decision to add an intervention, change an intervention, or move a student to a different tier. They based their comments on their concerns that not enough was being done to address the needs of the student.

Hence, throughout the interviews, the teachers addressed their comments to the individual student. The concerns they expressed were rooted in their apprehension that they may not be doing what is best for all their students. They expressed an understanding of RTI not as it relates to the identified components, but rather how it impacts the individual student.

**Teachers rely on each other.**

During the interviews, the teachers regularly discussed a teamwork approach to learning about RTI, implementing the interventions, and responding to the students' responses. They described an atmosphere where collaboration was welcomed and embraced.

Teachers learn by doing. This includes studying, reflecting, collaborating with other teachers, conducting their own inquiries, and developing portfolios about their practice. The connection between theory and practice is addressed when discussing the context of real students doing real work in a real classroom. Teachers do not learn best by reading research reports, listening to speeches, or attending workshops (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

While discussing professional development, teachers clearly stated that they did not gather adequate information about RTI to implement with confidence. They had questions about what it meant and how to put it into practice. To address these questions, they did not return to the presenters of the professional development, or to the materials provided by the district. Rather, they turned to each other. They trusted the people who were implementing the interventions along with them. They trusted each other.

A collaborative model offers moral support to the implementers of a new innovation. This moral support is present as teachers allow vulnerabilities to be expressed. It also allows failures and frustrations to be viewed as learning steps in the process of change. This is evident in risk-taking, introduction of new classroom strategies, and shared work demands among teachers (Hargreaves 1994).

Hargreaves also stated that collaboration allowed teachers to challenge each other's practices, perspectives and assumptions in a way that is professional and supportive. When

teachers have the opportunity to collaborate, the result can be teacher empowerment. The teachers described other teachers and support staff as readily available to discuss student progress. They included other general education teachers, special education teachers, reading specialists, social workers, school psychologists, and the interventions specialists as the resources they relied on to gather information. Even though the materials developed by the district for the purpose of professional development were distributed to each teacher, and the professional development presenters were all district personnel, the teachers did not refer to them as resources for learning about RTI. Rather, they turned to each other.

Teacher-to-teacher communication addressing realistic expectations concerning day-to-day operations enhances the possibility of successful implementation (Hargreaves 1994). Teachers who have the opportunity to collaborate with other teachers regarding student performance improve the chances of positively impacting student performance. The teachers described collaborating with grade level teachers to discuss their observations of a student. They spoke of seeking advice from the teachers the student had in previous years. They described brainstorming and kicking around ideas with other teachers.

The two central categories that determined the heart of the research concentrated on the focus of the teachers on the individual student and the trust that the teachers had in each other as they turned to themselves in the learning and implementation process.

### **Limitations**

In sum, this study has certain limitations in the areas of sample, researcher bias, and research methodology. The sample consisted solely of White females. The teachers were employed by a suburban district of a large Midwestern city. The students in the district were predominantly White. This limited variety in the sample population may have an impact on the

data. Additionally, the small sample size of 14 teachers may have impacted the themes that emerged.

Limitations may also involve the potential bias that I may have brought into the analysis process. As Patton (1990) stated, “The skilled analyst is able to get out of the way of the data to let the data tell its own story” (p. 393). My goal was to ‘get out of the way’ of the themes that surfaced and allow the story of the teachers to unfold. Awareness of possible bias led to verification of accuracy of the transcript through the process of member checking.

While a case study allows for the true meaning of experience of the individuals to be explored, generalizability is limited. The reader may find information that is interesting and extrapolate to make use of the findings. Extrapolations may be useful when they are based on data that are rich and relevant to the reader.

## **Implications**

Despite these limitations, the findings from this study clearly indicate that the implementation of an RTI system in a school creates a significant change in the role, responsibilities, and emotional well-being of the general education teachers. Through a procedural approach to satisfy the needs of struggling students with the necessary interventions, these teachers complied with the requirements of RTI. This compliance led to a school day that addressed the academic needs of the struggling students at a cost to other students. Data collection efforts and specific interventions were designed to address a component of reading, but impeded the development of readers. Time required for the implementation of interventions replaced time for students.

Classroom teachers questioned the decisions they made on a daily basis. They made on-the-spot curricular decisions for students who missed instructional time. They worked

purposefully to meet the demands of RTI, even when it meant relinquishing personal time. They searched for and found those who could answer their questions about the implementation of interventions. While their message acknowledged that RTI is good for struggling students, their perspective longed to be wider. They wanted to know what the impact was of the curricular decisions they made. They wanted to know what happened to students when they left their building. They wanted to know the long-term effect of the RTI decisions they made.

As the teachers discussed the challenge of fitting everything in, the focus was on the features of time, schedules, and students who did not receive interventions. The challenge is bigger than any individual feature. Fitting everything in ruled the day. Attempts to provide all, to all who needed it, took on its own agenda, and reactions/decisions to one situation impacted other situations. A piecemeal approach to making sure that each struggling student was receiving the appropriate intervention interfered with the proceedings of the classroom. Teachers made on-the-spot decisions that made them uncomfortable as they discarded one curricular area in favor of another.

The teachers described feelings of stress and frustration. Feeding the stress and frustration were the obligations of RTI. Dedicated to their students on the individual level, the teachers were determined to satisfy the components of RTI in order to address their struggling students. With the internal structure challenging their endeavors, they developed emotional reactions to their implementation efforts. While the teachers discussed their commitment to the students, they did not use the language of reform. It is noteworthy that they did not talk about how the school changed, but rather how they themselves shaped change.

**RTI as School Reform.**

Considering its impact, a major implication of this study is that RTI be viewed through a school reform lens. Approaching RTI as school reform allows district personnel to view the comprehensive nature of RTI. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) stated that educational reform addresses multifaceted problems that cannot be addressed with unilateral solutions. Under the umbrella of school reform, RTI is seen as complex and multilayered. Addressing RTI systemically requires a school-wide response to weave the layers of the initiative through the layers of the school. Instead of viewing RTI as a general education initiative, it is viewed as a philosophy to be embraced by all school personnel and interlaced throughout the conceptual framework of the school.

A school reform approach impacts the professional development provided by the district. The landscape of the school becomes the center of attention. The role of the teacher is redefined and the concepts of collaboration and reflection, two essential features of school reform and the sustainability of an innovation (Dexter & Hughes, 2011; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996) are intrinsically included. Data collection is used for the ultimate goal of developing readers with critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

To view RTI as simply adding a new approach to a school denies the large-scale transformation that is necessary for successful implementation. The sweeping changes impact curriculum, instructional approaches, assessment, data collection, decision-making, and the role of not only the general education teacher but also support staff and administration. Viewing RTI as school reform is a critical step for the successful realization of RTI.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

The focus of current RTI research is fairly limited (Kratchowill et al., 2007). The findings of this study support the call for further research. The viewpoints of the general education teachers have exposed additional topics to consider. With the ten themes that emerged from this study, each theme offers an opportunity to further examine its basis. Additional studies exploring the viewpoints of general education teachers would increase the variation among participants and broaden the data. Case studies conducted in a variety of school settings could validate the issues discussed by the participants.

The two teachers with special education background provided a contrasting view on the timeline of intervention implementation. Continued research could determine the significance of this difference. The results may impact teacher education programs. One participant had Type 75 certification. Her approach to problem-solving differed from the other participants. Research delving into teachers with administrative certification could discuss the relevance.

The participants were second and third grade teachers. RTI research is lacking in the areas of middle school and high school. The viewpoints of general education teachers in the upper grades could shed light on how RTI impacts the faculty of the older students.

The quality of professional development impacts the quality of the initiative. Studies to help determine best practices for RTI training would be a contribution to the RTI literature.

## **Conclusion**

The heart of the research, determined by the themes that surfaced in this study, clearly define the general education teachers as committed to the academic progress of the individual student, and dependent on other teachers to further their knowledge of RTI. The teachers made it clear that they want each student to make academic progress, and they are willing to work within



the parameters of RTI. Directing further research to address the themes that materialized in this study would add to the existing literature.

## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your teaching assignment.
  - Experience/certification in SPED
2. How would you explain RTI to a new teacher? (Knowledge)
  - Purpose of RTI
  - Training
  - Resources available
  - Support
3. Tell me about the impact RTI has had. (Perceptions)
  - Educator
    - Self
      - ❖ collect and analyze data for determining instruction
    - Colleagues
    - Administrator
    - Time
    - Scheduling
  - Students
    - Moved from tier 1 to tier 2 to tier 3
    - Parents

**Appendix B****Contact Summary Form**

Date\_\_\_\_\_

Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Site\_\_\_\_\_

Phone\_\_\_\_\_ Address \_\_\_\_\_

Starting Time: \_\_\_\_\_ Ending Time: \_\_\_\_\_

What were the main issues or themes that struck me in this interview?

Describe anything that was salient, interesting, illuminating, or important in this interview.

How do teachers perceive RTI?

What does the teacher know about RTI?

**Appendix B (continued)**

What are the teacher's perceptions toward RTI?

What new (or remaining) information do I want to focus on for the next interview?

List the information I failed to get in this interview.

## Appendix C

**University of Illinois at Chicago**  
**Research Information and Consent for Participation in Social Behavioral Research**  
**General Education Teachers' Viewpoints Concerning Response to Intervention**

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Researchers are required to provide a consent form such as this one to tell you about the research, to explain that taking part is voluntary, to describe the risks and benefits of participation, and to help you to make an informed decision. You should feel free to ask the researchers any questions you may have.

Principal Investigator Name and Title: **Eileen Ryan, Doctoral Candidate**  
Department and Institution: **Special Education, College of Education**  
Address and Contact Information: **1040 W. Harrison Street, Chicago, IL 60607**  
Phone: **(773) 350-5280** E-mail: **eryanteach@msn.com**  
Faculty Sponsor: **Mary Bay, Ph.D.**

### **Why am I being asked?**

You are being asked to be interviewed for a research study investigating the viewpoint of general education teachers as they implement Response to Intervention. You have been asked to participate because you (1) are a full time general education teacher in the participating school district and (2) have been teaching in this district for no less than three years.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future dealings with the University of Illinois at Chicago. **If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.**

Approximately 15 subjects may be involved in this research at UIC.

### **What procedures are involved?**

If you agree to participate, we would ask you to participate in two audio recorded interviews. The first interview will be a face-to-face interview conducted at your school and will last 60-90 minutes. The second interview will be conducted over the phone at time that is convenient for you and will last 30-60 minutes. You will then have the opportunity to review for accuracy the transcription of each interview. This review may take up to two hours.

### **What are the potential risks and benefits to taking part in this research?**

To the best of our knowledge, the risks of this study are no greater that you would experience in everyday life. A risk of this research is a loss of privacy (revealing to others that you are taking

### **Appendix C (continued)**

part in this study) or confidentiality (revealing information about you to others to whom you have not given permission to see this information).

Consequently, all personal information will be kept confidential and data will be de-identified. The master key of participants and school district pseudonyms will be kept in a locked file cabinet and will be destroyed within one year of data collection.

Although there are no direct benefits to the participants, participating in the study may prompt you to be reflective and grow professionally, and the results of the study may add to the pool of research.

#### **What other options are there?**

You have the option to not participate in this study.

#### **What about privacy and confidentiality?**

The people who will know that you are a research subject are the members of the research team. The team consists of Eileen Ryan, as principal researcher, and Dr. Mary Bay, faculty advisor at UIC. Otherwise, information about you will be disclosed to others only with your permission, or if necessary to protect your rights or welfare or if required by law. Study information which identifies you and the consent form signed by you will be looked at and/or copied by the UIC IRB and State of Illinois auditors for checking up on the research. When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity.

The only people who will know that you are involved are the researchers. No information about you, or provided by you during the research will be disclosed to others without your written permission, except when required by law and if it is necessary to protect your rights or welfare (i.e. when the UIC Institutional Review Board monitors the research or consent process). State of Illinois auditors may also monitor the research or consent process.

Raw data will be protected and reported in the aggregate form, with the exception of specific teacher comments, that will be reported as examples of major themes or results. These specific teacher comments will be reported anonymously, that is, without any identifying information. The names of the participants and school district, and their corresponding pseudonyms will be stored in locked file cabinet, and will be destroyed within one year of data collection.

#### **Can I withdraw or be removed from the study?**

You can choose whether or not to participate in this study. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without consequence. You may also opt not to answer any of the questions during the interview and still remain in the study.

### **Appendix C (continued)**

The Researchers also have the right to stop your participation in this study without your consent if they believe it is in your best interests.

#### **Who should I contact if I have questions?**

The researcher conducting this study is Eileen Ryan. If you have any questions about this study or your part in it, or have concerns or complaints about the research you may contact Eileen at [eryanteach@msn.com](mailto:eryanteach@msn.com). Dr. Mary Bay is the faculty advisor and she can be reached at [marybay@uic.edu](mailto:marybay@uic.edu) or 1-866-323-7648.

#### **What are my rights as a research subject?**

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, including questions, concerns, complaints, or to offer input, you may call the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS) at 312-996-1711 or 1-866-789-6215 (toll-free) or e-mail OPRS at [uicirb@uic.edu](mailto:uicirb@uic.edu).

#### **Remember:**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.

#### **Signature of Subject or Legally Authorized Representative**

I have read (or someone has read to me) the above information. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this research. I will be given a copy of this signed and dated form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date (must be same as subject's)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent

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## VITA

**Eileen Maloney Ryan**

### **Education**

**Ph.D. in Special Education**, University of Illinois at Chicago. Research interests: response to intervention, self-determination, students with special needs in Catholic schools.

**Master of Science in Education**, Chicago State University.

**Bachelor of Science in Special Education and Elementary Education**, Western Illinois University.

### **Continuing Education**

University of Kansas, Seminar on Strategies for Teaching Students with Learning Disabilities

Additional graduate hours: Montana State University, Northeastern Illinois University, Governors State University

### **Post-secondary Teaching Experience**

University of Illinois at Chicago

Political and Socio-Cultural Perspectives on Special Education

Characteristics of Exceptional Learners in Inclusive Settings

St. Xavier University

Behavior Management

Prairie State College

Observation and Guidance of Children

Language Arts for Children

Child Growth and Development

Multicultural Education

### **Previous Teaching Experience**

High School

Mount Carmel High School

Mother McAuley Liberal Arts High School

Providence Catholic High School

Developed and Established Learning Resource Programs for Students with Special Needs:

Conducted needs assessments

Chaired North Central Association Steering Committee (Mount Carmel)

Developed Accommodation Guide and Accommodation Guide Handbook

Provided students with strategies-based instruction to supplement content area classes

Collaborated with classroom teachers to provide services and accommodations to students with special needs

- Taught study skills, organization, time management skills, and test-taking strategies
- Guided students in developing self-advocacy skills
- Developed individual learning profiles with students
- Consulted with psychologists regarding current and prospective students
- Collaborated with elementary school teachers regarding placement of incoming freshmen
- Established protocol for incoming freshmen interviews
- Counseled students concerning college choices
- Prepared students for college interviews
- Chaired the Struggling Student Committee (Mother McAuley)
- Served on Discipline Board (Mount Carmel)
- Supervised staff of resource teachers

#### Pre-School

- AERO Special Education Cooperative
- Conducted cognitive, motor, and speech/language screenings for children ages 3-5

#### Elementary School

- Poplar Elementary School - Fort Peck Indian Reservation, Poplar, Montana
- Reading – Grades 1-3
- Collaborated with classroom teachers to provide remedial instruction

### Consulting Work

- United States Council of Catholic Bishops (2001-2002)
  - In collaboration with the Center for Educational Partnerships conducted national survey to determine presence of special needs students in Catholic Elementary and High Schools and presented report of findings to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

#### Department of Education (2002)

- In collaboration with the Center for Educational Partnerships coordinated two focus groups at the National Teacher Forum in Washington, D.C., and presented report of findings and recommendations to Department of Education

#### MusicAlive (1999-2002)

- Coordinated Reading/Math instructional program in elementary schools in Chicago and Mobile, Alabama

#### Archdiocese of Chicago (1995-1997)

- Coordinated Title I Tutoring Initiative between Archdiocesan High School Students and Chicago Public Schools Elementary Students

### Professional Development

- Provided professional development to classroom teachers and administration
  - Mount Carmel High School – Study Skills
  - Mother McAuley High School – Identifying a Learning Disability
  - Providence Catholic High School – The role of the General Education Teacher with Students with Special Needs
  - St. Benedict High School – Test-Taking Strategies
  - Mount Assisi Academy – Introducing an Initiative to a School

**Additional Pursuits**

St. Xavier University (1998-2000)

Member of the Learning Disability Advisory Board

Park Lawn School for Developmentally Disabled (1989-1992)

School Board member

President 1992

**Certificates**

Type 3 Elementary Teaching K-9

Type 10 Special Teaching K-12

**Endorsements**

Learning Behavior Specialist 1	Preschool – Age 21
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Learning Disabled	Preschool – Age 21
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Mental Retardation	Preschool – Age 21
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**Approvals**

Early Childhood Special Education Teacher

**Professional Affiliations**

Council for Exceptional Children

Learning Disabilities Association

National Association for the Education of Young Children

Attention Deficit Disorder Association