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Response to Intervention: An Interpretive Case Study of Educators' Perspectives On the Roles of School Culture, Personal Beliefs, and Program Knowledge On Implementation.

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RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION: AN INTERPRETIVE CASE STUDY OF
EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROLES OF SCHOOL CULTURE,
PERSONAL BELIEFS, AND PROGRAM KNOWLEDGE ON IMPLEMENTATION.

by

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my brother Derrick Rota whom I love and miss dearly. My work is also dedicated to my family and friends who gave me courage and support in my endeavor to complete my doctoral program. I would like to thank my husband, Joseph Sande, for his continued support, my daughters Emmy Sande and Cheyenne Sande, for their patience, and my parents George and Elizabeth Rota, especially my mother, for her constant encouragement. I would also like to dedicate this work to my siblings Clara Ellul, Steve Rota, Diana Rota, Dorothy Rota, and Arnold Gumbe.

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ABSTRACT

In education today there is a heightened emphasis on teacher accountability for improving student outcomes. The law requires that in order for a student to qualify as a student with a disability, the child's IEP team must ensure that the child's problem is not due to poor instructional programming. Therefore, the general education teacher is encouraged to use research-based interventions and a systematic method of data collection and progress monitoring, so he or she can determine whether a child qualifies for the referral stage of the special education identification process. Response to intervention (RTI) is a systematic multi-tiered process of instruction, intervention, monitoring and identification used to ensure that all learners are receiving appropriate education and that struggling learners are identified and assisted early before they fail.

The purpose of this study was to explore and gain information about teachers' and administrators' perceptions of RTI and the roles that school culture, personal beliefs, and knowledge of RTI may play in its implementation. I conducted a multi-site interpretive case study in order to examine some of the underlying factors that shape or influence how general educators and administrators implement RTI, including fidelity of implementation of the core curriculum and supplemental programs chosen for Tier 1 of the RTI process. Through individual interviews, observations and document review, I was able to capture teachers' and administrators' pedagogical beliefs and interpret how they influence what general educators and administrators think about RTI and the ways

the school implements programs for the general population of students. The findings illustrate how these three areas affect implementation efforts. The theories that guided this study included cultural theory (Deal & Peterson, 2009), conflict theory (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), and structural-functionalism (Kingsbury & Scanzoni, 1993). Through the use of open coding and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), thematic and narrative analysis (Hess-Biber & Leavy 2004), thirteen themes were developed from an interpretation of the participants' responses. Participants also shared other factors that impact implementation such as classroom sizes, scheduling, time and personnel. Funding and professional development was cited as a necessary for effective implementation.

Dissertation Director: Dr. Kathleen Marshall

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Response to intervention (RTI) is a systematic decision-making process that has gained widespread popularity as a problem-solving framework for organizing hierarchies of evidence-based interventions in the context of ongoing progress monitoring (Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2010). It is a process for evaluating whether students respond to scientifically validated instruction, and a process in which procedural knowledge, role differentiation, fidelity to a set of practices, and local context interact (Artiles & Bal, 2008). RTI is part of a larger complex of systems, influences, and practices that encompasses both special education and general education (Klingner et al., 2005). This multi-tiered intervention approach is used to meet the needs of all students including students with disabilities (Burns, Appleton, & Stehouwer, 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; Mellard, Bryd, Johnson, Tollefson, & Boesche, 2004). In schools today, various RTI versions or models exist, yet “. . . it is better to think of RTI as a process and not a single model . . .” (Fletcher, Lyon, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007, p. 51).

RTI was introduced to special education over a decade ago in response to concerns about the over identification of children with learning disabilities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Traditional special education decision-making was plagued by a number of

serious problems including the static nature of assessment that guided classification decisions and the lack of demonstrated technical adequacy (reliability and validity of decisions) of measures used for making classification decisions (Barnett, Lentz, & Macmann, 2000). The report of the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (OSERS, 2002) made important recommendations for change. First, the report recommended the abandonment of the traditional classification process in favor of a decision-making process based on response to instruction for LD identification (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). Second, scientifically validated interventions and continuous progress monitoring (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986) were strongly encouraged for making instructional decisions that lead to effective special services. Third, the commission recommended that new models of interventions should not be based on "waiting for children to fail" before organized interventions are attempted (O'Shaughnessy, Lane, Gresham, & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2003). Finally, the President's Commission recommended the adoption of a dynamic progress monitoring method for making decisions about continuing services reevaluations.

It is for these reasons that RTI was developed and subsequently gained acceptance as a process that could be used to identify students with LD. The premise behind RTI is that practitioners identify students as potentially having a learning disability only when their response to research-validated intervention is dramatically inferior to that of peers (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). RTI is typically a three-tier system (beginning in general education and ending in special education) that, in principle, should reduce the number of students incorrectly identified as having a disability (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005).

Background Information

RTI is based on a public health prevention model (Caplan, 1964) as adopted in the school psychology literature (e.g., Klingman, 1986; Klingman & Ben Eli, 1981). The tiered model of RTI is similar to the public health model, which has three to four tiers of treatment interventions. Each of the tiers may be considered treatment phases. The public health model begins at the primary stage where general medication is provided to treat an identified symptom. When the initial treatment is not successful, more intense treatment is provided. The intensity of the treatment using stronger doses of medication continues until success is achieved. Similarly, RTI has phases or tiers. Within these tiers, students who are struggling receive academic and or behavioral interventions. The first tier is called the primary tier (Tier I). Here, intervention is provided within the general education classroom. When a student begins to struggle in the primary tier, the student is moved to the secondary tier (Tier II) to receive more intense support in addition to the primary intervention. If the student is still unable to attain academic or behavior success, then the student moves to the tertiary intervention stage (Tier III), which for many models is more individualized and may be special education services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005).

The adoption of a tiered model requires an infrastructure of systems and supports to ensure that practitioners can implement the model with fidelity and that the model becomes fully integrated into the instructional program (Hemmeter & Fox, 2009; Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006). Infrastructure features that support the implementation of RTI include several components. These components form the

procedural aspect of implementing RTI. The features, as described below, include universal screening, progress monitoring, use of evidence-based interventions, relevant professional development, and fidelity of implementation (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005).

When first implementing RTI, each school develops clear procedures for screening, progress monitoring, and the delivery of more intensive tiers of intervention to children. Screening involves testing all students using a criterion-referenced measure (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Students performing below a specific benchmark, for example the 25th percentile, are selected to receive intervention. Progress monitoring, a form of dynamic assessment using a formative evaluation process (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), is a way to monitor how a student is progressing in general education after receiving a more intensive intervention either within the classroom or outside the classroom. Frequently used instruments for progress monitoring include curriculum-based measurements (CBM) (VanDerHeyden & Jimerson, 2005).

RTI also requires ongoing training and support of teachers for implementation fidelity. Fidelity of implementation is the faithful, prescriptive presentation of the core curriculum or supplementary curriculum (intervention), as was intended by the program developer. A successful RTI system should include access to expertise in the design and implementation of Tier II and Tier III interventions. These experts should provide relevant training and support to ensure the successful implementation of an RTI process. Finally, there should be procedures for efficient and meaningful data collection and data-based decision making (Hemmeter et al., 2006).

Although many practitioners embrace RTI as an alternative method for identifying students with a specific learning disability (SLD), there has recently been a shift in emphasis from the identification to the instructional component of RTI (Kavale, Kauffman, Bachmeier, & LeFever, 2008). Recently, the National Association of School Psychologists (Klotz & Canter, 2006) emphasized RTI as a process of scientific research-based instruction and intervention in general education. RTI was also described as providing an improved process and structure for school teams in designing, implementing, and evaluating educational interventions that may be part of the evaluation procedures for special education eligibility. The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE, 2006) was even more direct in describing the nature of RTI by stating, “Special education eligibility decisions can be a product of these efforts, but is not the primary goal” (p. 1). Thus, the aim of RTI appears to have shifted in emphasis from identification to instruction and this shift is viewed as a consequential advantage so that RTI’s primary goal of providing outstanding instruction becomes the focus. With this new focus, RTI has gained widespread popularity as a problem-solving framework for organizing hierarchies of evidence-based interventions in the context of ongoing progress monitoring (Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2010).

Even though a majority of descriptions and discussions of RTI are currently found in the special education and school psychology literature, the multi-tier RTI model is implemented primarily in general education. Efforts to implement RTI should be in the larger context of educational practices and reforms, to ensure practitioners understand the broad focus of the initiative (Kavale, et. al, 2008). In other words, RTI should not have a narrow focus that only involves the use of special education strategies for students with

special needs. It should be clear to participants that RTI encompasses an educational reform agenda targeting the use of evidence-based interventions for all learners, especially struggling learners, implemented by both general educators and special educators. The multiple tiers of evidence-based interventions are used as preventative interventions for students with academic difficulties when in the general education classroom. The primary notion behind RTI, when it is used in this manner, is that it rules out poor instruction as an explanation for failure. This instruction begins within general education. Therefore, my focus is on issues of implementing RTI within a school, emphasizing instruction at the primary tier.

Statement of the Problem

One intent of NCLB was to use “. . . evidence-based and scientifically validated instructional practices designed to improve learning outcomes for all students” (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005, p. 14-15). In addition, the increase in the number of students identified with learning disabilities resulted in IDEA’s emphasis on improving instruction and reducing students identified for special services. RTI was introduced as a possible solution to both improving instruction and reducing the number of students identified with a learning disability (Kovalesky, 2007). The first tier is quality general education, which addresses the majority of students whose curricula should be carefully selected and implemented.

It is surprising that most schools' curricular choices, a central aspect of schooling that entails the "what" that students are expected to learn, had not been systematically studied prior to NCLB (Kovalesky, 2007). By definition, a curriculum consists of a

school's scope and sequence of knowledge and skills to be learned, and is determined by the materials and methods used to deliver that content (Kovalesky, 2007). Core curriculum in a general education class using the RTI model, must be high quality, research-based, and field-tested (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; 2006; 2007; Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). Such curriculum is to be delivered by highly qualified teachers sufficiently trained to deliver the selected instruction as intended, that is, with fidelity (Kovalesky, 2007) and resources such as 'What Works Clearing House' can guide stakeholders in the selection of research-validated programs.

The proposed study is grounded on the theory that for a program to be implemented with fidelity, the culture of the school, the ideologies of individual teachers and the practitioners' knowledge of the program are vital ingredients. The importance of these three components is supported by Structural-Functionalism theory (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), Cultural theory (Deal & Peterson, 2009) and Conflict theory (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Figure 1.1 is a conceptual model for implementation of a school-wide education reform.

Based on the broad perspective of structural-functionalism, society is seen as a structure with interrelated parts that function as whole. Research supports the notion that teacher leaders and other members of the school must be involved in creating and supporting a culture of a school including any form of cultural shift, if the shift is to take hold (Beauchum & Dentith, 2004; Bruffee, 1999; Langon-Fox & Tan 1997).

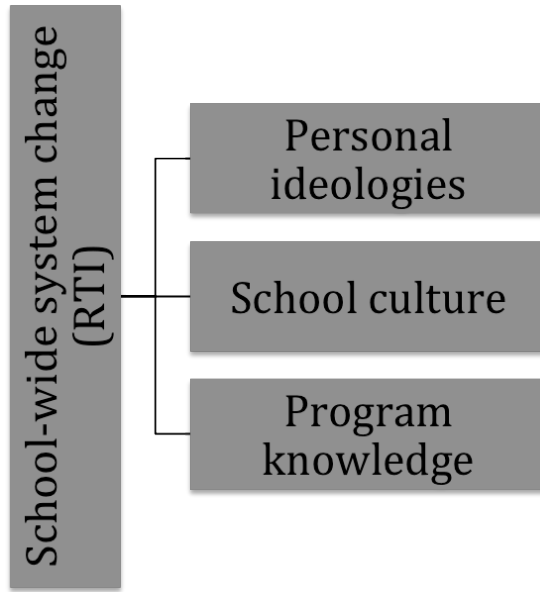


Figure 1.1: Conceptual Model for school-wide reforms.

In addition, individual teachers have unique roles in shaping any system-wide change. Teachers, administrators, and staff develop the building blocks of effective system-wide change. Shared vision, values, goals, beliefs and faith in school are components of school culture (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Fullan, 2005; Stolp, 1994; Stolp, & Smith, 1995). School personnel generally seek a school culture that supports work and high student achievement, (Brown, 2004; Gold, 2002).

Conflict theory helps us understand the dynamics of social change (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Bryk, Lee and Holland (1993) found that a sense of community or culture was a key factor in cultivating a sense of excellence in school. A conflict in the culture or

an unstable school culture without any established values may result in teachers and students working independently and doing different things.

Research Questions

The purpose of this investigation was to conduct a multi-site interpretive case study in order to examine some of the underlying factors that may shape or influence implementation of RTI, including fidelity of implementation, of the core curriculum and supplemental programs chosen for Tier I of the RTI process. In this study, investigations of some of the underlying factors that inform how general educators and administrators implement RTI were conducted, through individual interviews, observations and personal journals. My purpose was to capture teachers' and administrators' pedagogical beliefs and interpret how these influence what general educators and administrators thought about RTI and how their schools implemented programs for the general population of students.

My major research focus was to investigate how school culture, personal beliefs and knowledge of RTI may have affected the successful implementation of RTI in specific schools. Through this study I attempted to answer the following questions.

1. What are administrators and teachers' understanding of RTI and how RTI is being implemented in their classrooms?
2. What do teachers and administrators perceive as the role of school culture in the implementation of RTI in their school?
3. What do teachers and administrators report as their personal pedagogical beliefs that influence how they implement RTI?

4. What do teachers and administrators report as basic knowledge that they need to have to implement RTI in their schools?
5. What are some other school related factors that teachers and administrators report as influencing how they implement RTI?

This was an interpretive case study that looked at individual experiences when implementing RTI in the general education classroom and addressed some of the underlying factors that influence implementation. This research involved the use of interviews, observations, and documents. This study involved in-depth interviews of general education teachers teaching in schools implementing RTI. I delved into how teachers formulated their own teaching philosophies, how they incorporated their ideologies into their teaching and how these elements influenced their acceptance and delivery of a novel program.

Significance of Study

Much of the current research on RTI focuses on applied studies of particular interventions, implementation processes, and the identification of best practices in RTI sites (Bender, 2008; Cochrane & Laux 2007; Foorman, 2007; Hughes & Dexter, 2008; Hughes & Dexter, 2011). Furthermore, there are studies at the macro level about the large-scale implementation of RTI nationwide (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009; Burns, Appleton & Stohower, 2005; Campell & Ankettel, 2007; Dexter, Hughes, & Farmer, 2008). This study aims to contribute to the current research by providing the perspective of administrators and general education teachers on what RTI is and how they implement it at their schools. I will add to the narrative of RTI by providing in-depth

perspectives of RTI from the general educators' point of view and how their knowledge, beliefs and practices have influenced how they implement it. I will also look at the role of school culture in the implementation of novel programs. These results should include information that can inform policy makers of some of the underlying infrastructural requirements that can help make the introduction and implementation of a system-wide change successful.

Definition of Terms

Core Curriculum: The core curriculum is the course of study deemed critical and usually made mandatory for all students of a school or school system. It consists of a school's scope and sequence of knowledge and skills to be learned, and the materials and methods used to deliver that content (RTI Action Network, August 11, 2012).

Interpretive case study: Interpretive case studies are research studies where the researcher attempts to understand phenomena through accessing the meaning that participants assign to them (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991) and focuses on their cultural and historical context.

Evidence-based Practices: Evidence-based practices are educational practices and instructional strategies that are supported by scientific research studies (Coleman, Buysse, & Neitzel, 2006; RTI Action Network, August 11, 2012).

Fidelity of Implementation: Fidelity of implementation is the delivery of instruction in the way in which it was designed and intended for delivery (Gresham, MacMillan, Boebe-Frankenberger, & Bocian, 2000). Fidelity refers to the accurate and

consistent provision or delivery of instruction in the manner in which it was designed or prescribed according to research findings and/or developers' specifications (RTI Action Network, August 11, 2012).

Response to Intervention: RTI is a tiered system (beginning in general education and ending in special education) that serves the early intervention and disability identification objectives (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). In this multi-tiered system, students receive more intensive interventions as they move up the tiers.

Progress Monitoring: Progress monitoring is used to assess students' academic performance, to quantify a student rate of improvement or responsiveness to instruction, and to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction. Progress monitoring can be implemented with individual students or an entire class (RTI Action Network, August 11, 2012; Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2008).

Pyramid Model: Pyramid models have their origin from the public health literature. It is a system based on three tiers of prevention, primary, secondary and tertiary (RTI Action Network, December 5, 2012).

School Culture: Culture is the underground stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions, and rituals that have built up over time as people work together, solve problems, and confront challenges (Deal & Peterson, 1998).

Teachers Attitudes and Beliefs: Attitudes and beliefs are a subset of a group of constructs that name, define, and describe the structure and content of mental states that are thought to drive a person's actions (Richardson, 1996).

Teacher Self-Efficacy Beliefs: Self-Efficacy beliefs is a high internal locus of control and positive attitude toward overcoming difficult situations (Ashton, Webb & Doda, 1993).

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

All teachers face challenges because of the mandates of the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA, 20 U.S.C § 1400, 2004) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 20 U.S.C. 70 § 6301, 2002). Both general education and special education teachers have to ensure that all students have access to grade level standards. General education teachers are also accountable for ensuring that students are prepared for standardized testing while special education teachers are charged with developing Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs), and ensuring students meet IEP goals and objectives.

The demand for high quality instruction puts the general education teacher in the position of ensuring quality education for all students. It is only after the general education teacher has used research-based interventions and a systematic method of data collection and progress monitoring, that a child should qualify for the referral stage of the special education identification process. RTI is a systematic process of instruction, intervention, monitoring, and identification to ensure that all learners are receiving appropriate education and that struggling learners are identified and assisted early before they fail. RTI is one of the most recent educational reforms and it is important to understand how RTI, and other legislation and reforms have evolved.

Educational Legislation and Reform

Over the last 35 years, policymakers have called for school reforms that improve the practices of teachers and other professionals and increase student achievement (Elmore, 1995; Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Goodman, 1995; IDEA, 20 U.S.C § 1400, 2004; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; NCLB, 20 U.S.C. 70 § 6301, 2002; The Education of All Handicapped Children Act, PL 94-142, 1975). Laws targeting both general education and special education have added responsibility and accountability to teachers for the academic and behavioral success of each student in the school system. Special education has been the focus of almost 40 years of educational reform. Prior to 1975, only approximately 20% of students with disabilities were educated in public schools (Idol, 1987) and various education reforms have made it possible to increase these percentages.

In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) P.L 94-142 was passed into law. This law granted children with disabilities a right to free and appropriate public education (FAPE), the right to IEPs, and a right to be educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (IDEA 20 U.S.C.§ 1400). To meet LRE requirements meant that schools had to use a continuum of alternative placements beginning with general education setting and ending in residential facilities (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley 2001; Yell, 2006). Nevertheless, special education and general education remained separate entities. The majority of students with special education services were only included in nonacademic classes such as Art, Music, Physical Education and technical courses (Idol, 1987).

In the 1980s, there were continued demands for schools to adopt higher academic standards and for educators to be accountable for all students' achievement. It was also during this time that those who advocated for students with special needs wanted services to be provided to meet these students individual needs (Yell, 2006). Proponents of the Regular Education Initiative (REI) proposed the inclusion of children with mild disabilities in the general education setting (Carnine & Granzin, 2001). Many general education teachers indicated that they did not have the time, training or the resources to be able to provide instruction to students with disabilities (Carnine & Granzin, 2001). Nevertheless, students with mild disabilities began to receive increasingly more of their education in general education classes.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was passed into law in 1975. This law was reauthorized several times and in 1990 became known as IDEA (IDEA 20 U.S.C. § 1400). In 1997, IDEA's reauthorization made it possible for students with special needs to gain access to the general education curriculum and graduate with diplomas like their non-disabled peers (Yell, 2006). Changes needed to be made in the general education curriculum to accommodate the greater number of students with special needs now served primarily in the general education classroom.

Since reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001, titled the NCLB (NCLB, 20 U.S.C § 1411(e) (2) (C) (xi)), the issue of "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) began to dominate education policy debate (Canine & Granzin, 2001). AYP is determined in part by a year-end state standardized test of grade-level content in reading and mathematics for elementary school students (Nese, Park, Alonzo, & Tindal,

2011). Districts and schools are accountable for students meeting state standards on these tests, and CBM assessments are often used to help predict student proficiency and identify students at risk for not passing these high-stakes tests (Nese, Park, Alonzo, & Tindal, 2011). Accountability in NCLB began with the requirement of high stakes standardized achievement tests where student scores were aggregated to determine whether schools or districts met state standards. These standards were required in math, science, reading, and social studies. There were practitioners who saw AYP as the means by which the federal government would finally foster quality education in schools and provide the necessary funds for this endeavor (Canine & Granzin, 2001; McDonnell, 2005). To meet the demands of AYP, schools were required to employ highly qualified teachers and use research-based programs and interventions to ensure that no child *was* left behind (Canine & Granzin, 2001). Criteria for highly qualified status may vary from state to state. According to the South Carolina state requirements, a highly qualified teacher is one who has earned at least a bachelor's degree, demonstrated content knowledge in each core content area he/she teaches, and has a full state certification (scteachers.org, May 21, 2012).

Typically, the general purpose of educational reforms is to enhance educational services and ultimately improve student outcome. The purpose of the current reform movement -NCLB- is to increase student achievement for all students, especially high poverty students, at-risk students, and special education students (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003; Sterbinsky, Ross, & Redfield, 2006). Since NCLB and comprehensive school reform have the important goal of improving student learning, the current accountability reform movement, along with past federal educational legislation,

has prompted the creation of RTI, a popular initiative for targeting and enhancing the achievement of at-risk students (Desimone, 2002). The focus of this research will be on the RTI initiative with an emphasis on its implementation in the general education classroom.

This literature review is divided into three sections. In the first section, the literature includes a general overview of RTI including its features and attributes. The purpose for this review is to give a glimpse of the structure of an RTI framework, including the various components that are important in its composition. This will be followed by an examination of the standard protocol approach versus the problem-solving approach in an RTI model mainly to highlight their differences and reveal how various researchers interpret their characteristics and importance in the instruction of students. Furthermore, this section of the literature review will examine large-scale and small-scale models of RTI. Finally, I will discuss RTI as an instructional process as well as a means of identifying children with learning disabilities and the on-going debate about the true purpose of RTI.

The second part of this review will focus on comprehensive school reforms (CSR) and some of the factors that researchers have identified as affecting their development and eventual sustainability. I will then continue with a review of research on core curriculum instruction and the importance of an evidence-based core curriculum in a successful RTI model. I will review research on fidelity of implementation highlighting its importance in a well-structured RTI model. Following this will be a review of effectiveness of RTI models. The last section of this review will focus on the theories that

guided this study which explain the lens through which I base my interpretation of data. This will be followed by a summary of the chapter.

Response to Intervention

RTI can be defined as a process aimed at evaluating and addressing the educational needs of all students and identifying students needing intervention beyond what the teacher provides during typical classroom instruction (Shapiro & Clemens, 2009). The premise behind RTI is that we identify students as potentially having a learning disability (LD), when their response to research-validated intervention is dramatically inferior to that of peers (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). Furthermore, RTI encourages the use of evidence-based instruction across tiers, which, in principle, should reduce the number of students incorrectly identified as having a disability. RTI is a multi-tier system (beginning in general education and ending in special education) that is considered an early intervention and disability identification process (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). Broad overarching goals, such as improving overall student achievement and improving the process of identifying and placing students into special education, are central outcomes of an RTI process (Shapiro & Clemens, 2009).

Nevertheless, to some, RTI can best be viewed as an instructional model, not an identification model, and consequently, should not be the basis for LD identification (Kavale, et al., 2008). With its rigorous and systematic procedures, RTI can enhance the pre-referral process and achieve the aim of reducing the number of unnecessary referrals (Kavale, et al., 2008). In fact, RTI is only one part of a viable identification procedure, as the federal law requires a comprehensive evaluation (Hollenbeck, Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007;

McDonnell, 2005). Conversely, some view it as the best identification model and seem to suggest that RTI may be the basis for redefining learning disabilities (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

According to The National Center for Response to Intervention, RTI integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavioral problems (NCRTI, August 2012). With RTI, schools use data to identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions, adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student's responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities or other disabilities. In essence, RTI is both a systematic approach to instruction and an identification process for struggling learners.

Researchers envisioned the RTI system to be systematic and grounded in a problem-solving framework that included universal screening, use of research-based interventions, progress monitoring on an established schedule, and data-based decisions related to the child's possible need for special education services (Dexter, Hughes, & Farmer, 2008). Once the RTI process was developed, researchers debated the best way to measure its effectiveness – improved outcomes, fewer referrals for special education evaluation, or improved classroom instruction (Kovalesky, 2007). Vaughn and Fuchs (2006) noted that a decrease in the number of students in special education is not an appropriate outcome for evaluating the effectiveness of RTI. Similarly, Kovaleski and Glew (2006) noted that although stemming the rapid rise of students identified with specific learning disabilities (SLD) was frequently used as a rationale for instituting

various "regular education initiatives" in the 1990s, the passage of the NCLB (2001) legislation created a new societal goal—increasing the percentage of students who pass state proficiency tests, with a terminal goal of 100% proficiency for all students by 2013-2014. The use of RTI enables educators to facilitate the implementation of high quality instruction and data-based decision making (Mellard et al., 2004; Mellard & Johnson, 2008).

The RTI process

Practitioners and researchers usually refer to classroom instruction as Tier I and many describe the importance of classroom teachers using scientifically validated instruction (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). When students do not respond to scientifically valid instruction in Tier I, these students are moved to Tier II (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). Tier II is small group, more intensive instruction using scientifically based intervention. While Tier II instruction is delivered, practitioners evaluate student responsiveness. More specifically, performance must be categorized as responsive or nonresponsive (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). Students who are still nonresponsive then move to Tier III, which is even more intensive and has a smaller teacher-student ratio. In some RTI models, Tier III is special education, while for some RTI models it is another tier of intensive intervention before students become eligible for special education services.

RTI implementation usually begins with screening of all students. All children in a class, school, or district are tested by a single test administration or by repeated measurement in a circumscribed period, and the “at-risk” students are then identified for intervention on the basis of their performance level or growth rate or both (Fuchs &

Fuchs, 2005). RTI requires that students are tested throughout the intervention period, and those who do not respond may receive a multi-disciplinary team evaluation for possible disability certification and special education placement (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005).

In practice, RTI can look quite different from school to school. Many authors (e.g., Gersten & Dimino, 2006; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2002; Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009) have noted that there is a lack of uniformity across the research community concerning the process, purpose and structure of RTI models. Nevertheless, several key components are deemed necessary for a successful RTI program (Bender & Shores, 2007c; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005).

The first component of RTI is universal screening. Students are generally screened early in the school year to determine if they may have educational difficulties, and to help their teachers figure out what extra lessons they may need (Glover, & DiPerna, 2007). Screening tests, also known as benchmark assessments, are used to measure the achievement of all students to ensure they continue to meet expectations throughout the year and also to identify students who need additional monitoring and intervention (Mellard, 2003). A second key feature is the use of high quality, research-based core instruction in general education. Core instruction should use a research-based curriculum to meet the educational needs of a majority of students (Fuchs & Dechler, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

The third component is evidence-based interventions. Children with learning difficulties receive increasingly intense instruction geared to strengthening the areas

where they need help. The interventions must be scientifically based and given with fidelity. NCLB describes scientifically based research as,

Research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs; ensures that experimental studies are presented in sufficient detail and clarity to allow for replication or, at a minimum, offer the opportunity to build systematically on their findings; and, has been published by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts through a comparably rigorous, objective, and scientific review. (NCLB, 2001, 20 U.S.C. § 1411(e) (2) (C) (xi))

Progress monitoring is the fourth component of RTI. Progress monitoring is the continuous assessment and evaluation of student performance on the various interventions being implemented. Perhaps the best-known and most applied systematic assessment of students' performance is curriculum-based measurement (CBM), an evidence-based approach used to measure students' academic status and progress and to evaluate the effectiveness of instruction (Deno, Fuchs, Marston, & Shin, 2001; Deno, Marston, & Tindal, 1985; Fuchs, 2004; Good & Jefferson, 1998; Kranzler, Brownell, & Miller, 1998; Shinn, Good, Knutson, Tilly, & Collins, 1992; Tucker, 1987). CBM provides a method to measure student achievement using both screening and progress-monitoring assessments and also helps guide teachers' instruction by identifying students' specific academic deficits. Progress monitoring continues for students in Tier II throughout the school year, to make sure the extra interventions are working. Students

who show poor response to this second and more intense form of intervention are considered to have demonstrated unexpected failure to the validated intervention (Hollenbeck, Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). Then, if a student still has not responded to several different interventions, he or she may need further evaluation, or special education services. The expectation among some proponents of RTI is that by providing intensive instruction as soon as a problem is noted, children can steer away from special education (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). CBM represents an empirically supported system of progress monitoring that has produced demonstrated effects on student achievement, particularly in reading (Fuchs, Deno, & Mirkin, 1984; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Hamlett, 1989; Good & Jefferson 1998; Jones & Krause, 1988).

A fifth important feature is Tiered model of intervention. RTI is a multi-tiered system where students receive intensive interventions as they move up the Tiers (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). Intensity of interventions and frequency of progress monitoring increases as students move up in Tiers. Movement across Tiers should be fluid and change based on results of progress monitoring and decisions made by problem-solving teams. Most models include three or four Tiers of service delivery.

The formation of problem-solving teams also is considered an essential feature of RTI. A problem-solving team should consist of general and special education teacher, school psychologists, parents, administrators and any other specialist such as social workers or speech and language pathologists (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Nellis, 2012). The function of the team is to analyze data from the universal screening as well as the progress monitoring data using a systematic set of activities to guide each meeting.

The seventh crucial feature of RTI is data-based decision making. The RTI system uses a multi-disciplinary team to evaluate student progress. Through various progress monitoring methods, the multi-disciplinary team makes data-driven decisions on how best to serve students not responding to intervention. Data-driven decision-making involves the collection of data such as student grades or scores and using the data in making determination of where student should be placed or moved (Mellard & Johnson, 2008).

Finally, fidelity of implementation is crucial to the success of RTI. Fidelity refers to the accurate and consistent provision or delivery of instruction in the manner in which it was designed or prescribed according to research findings and/or developers' specifications (RTI Action Network, August, 2012). This component of RTI poses a challenge to many schools. All interventions and core instruction should be implemented with integrity. As will be discussed later, different schools use different models of implementation. With such variation, it is difficult to come up with a common universal tool to assess implementation fidelity. Nevertheless, to ensure fidelity of implementation, fidelity checks need to be in place that have been developed by the school district and should include items such as observations protocols or checklists.

All these components form part of the critical features of RTI necessary for effective implementation (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). In addition, general education teachers should have high-quality professional development selected and designed based on assessment of school, teacher, and student needs, and targeted instruction designed to

accelerate learning for students demonstrating learning difficulties (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007).

RTI Approaches: Standard Treatment Protocol and Problem-solving Protocol

Statewide and district-wide models use two main approaches to the RTI process. These are the Standard Treatment Protocol (Standard Protocol) and Problem-solving approaches (Bender & Shores, 2007a, 2007b; Fuchs, Fuchs & Compton, 2004; Fuchs et al., 2003; McNamara & Hollinger, 2003). In the problem-solving approach, individually tailored interventions designed to address student's needs are developed through a decision-making process conducted by problem-solving teams. These teams typically consist of the classroom teacher, special education teacher, school principal, school psychologist, and other school personnel as needed. One purpose of a problem-solving approach is to first determine whether the general education classroom can be transformed into a productive learning environment for at-risk students (Fuchs, Fuchs & Compton, 2004). Students who are unresponsive to Tier I or Tier II instruction continue to receive individual adaptations. The assumption is that if the individualized adaptations do not produce growth for the at risk students, some inherent deficit or disability is probably making it difficult for them to benefit and they may be referred for special education evaluation (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2004). This part of the problem-solving approach is sometimes referred to as pre-referral intervention (Fuchs et al., 2003; McNamara & Hollinger, 2003).

Fuchs and Fuchs (2005) described a standard protocol model as one in which preselected interventions are used when a student does not adequately respond to

instruction. A typical example would be, students at risk for reading disability are assessed and provided 8- 10 weeks of the same supplemental, small-group reading instruction. Afterwards, all who meet a preset criterion are no longer included in the supplemental instruction. The remaining students are regrouped and provided another 8- 10 weeks of instruction. This continues for about 30 weeks. Then the subsets of students who still have not met criteria for dismissal from supplemental instruction may be considered for special education.

Both RTI approaches have proven successful for different states as well as school districts. Even though differences exist between the two approaches, both require research-based interventions and ongoing process monitoring (Bender & Shores, 2007a; 2007b). There are several other modifications of these two approaches (Dexter, Hughes & Farmer, 2008). There are also hybrid models (Reschley, 2005), which incorporate aspects from both the problem-solving model and the standard protocol model. Furthermore, the implementation of these models can either be on a large scale or a small scale.

Large-scale and small-scale implementations

RTI is typically implemented one of two ways. The first way is considered large-scale implementation and includes models implemented at the state or district level. District or state personnel develop the district/state-implementation programs. Dexter, Hughes, and Farmer, (2008) indicate that large-scale programs incorporate large numbers of students across multiple schools in a district or state.

Researchers describe the second type as smaller scale RTI programs developed primarily by university-based researchers. Small-scale implementations incorporate fewer students across a smaller number of schools and university researchers typically conducted the tiered interventions.

Dexter, Hughes, and Farmer (2008) describe examples of some of the models considered large-scale or field-based models. These include Heartland Agency Model (Instructional Decision making-IDM process) in Iowa, Intervention-Based Assessment in Ohio, and Instructional Support Team (IST) in Pennsylvania. These also include the Flexible Service Delivery Model (FSDM) in Illinois, Problem-Solving Model (MPSM) in Minneapolis (Minnesota), Screening to Enhance Equitable Placement (STEEP) model in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arizona, and Results Based Model (RBM) in Idaho. In addition, the authors highlight some other common model titles such as Standard Protocol Mathematics Model (SPMM), Tiers of Reading Intervention (TRI) and Exit Group Model. Other states that use large-scale models include Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Oregon, Washington and West Virginia.

States are currently in the process of deciding not only how to interpret the new federal law in their own regulations but also how to put RTI in place (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009). Most are still in a transition state regarding RTI implementation. Research revealed that 22 states had RTI models in schools, while 10 states were providing guidance to begin implementation. States that provided guidance had not yet initiated RTI programs in schools but had provided information about RTI

and were in the process of providing professional development before implementation of RTI.

At the time of this research only three states were not currently providing guidance or even developing a model. Many of the states implementing RTI had either created their own model or modified models from research literature (Berkeley et al., 2009). The majority of schools using the problem-solving approach used a three or four Tier process, however, some schools included more Tiers.

Research on effectiveness of RTI

Due to the variations of RTI models and the different levels of RTI development of many schools, it is relatively difficult to assess overall effectiveness of RTI implementation. Moreover, overall effectiveness is often measured by students' outcomes, which may be influenced by extraneous factors beyond the steps of implementing RTI such as the characteristics of the teacher, availability of additional technology and so on. Nevertheless, individual studies have attempted to show effectiveness of implementing RTI. Measures of effectiveness included improved student outcomes, reduction in student referral for special education services, reduction in spending on special education services, positive perception of the RTI process, and improvement on instruction delivery (Burns et al., 2005; Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; VanDerHeyden, Witt & Gilbertson, 2007)

Burns et al. (2005) conducted a meta-analysis of large-scale RTI implementation models including the four field-based models (Heartland Agency Model, IBA, IST, and PSM), and other research-based models. The results indicated that there were strong

effects for the effectiveness of models implemented at a large scale, including improved student outcomes, and a positive systemic outcome. Although both field and research-based RTI programs had strong effects, field-based RTI models, including Heartland Agency Model, IBA, IST, and PSM, consistently had stronger unbiased estimates of effects than models implemented by researchers.

Furthermore, independent researchers reviewed the large-scale models, providing an unbiased estimate of effectiveness. Burns et al. (2005) argued that due to the longer implementation of interventions used in practice for the district or state-implemented programs, these RTI programs showed stronger effects than the researcher-based programs which may not have had ongoing support to ensure continued implementation. The strong effect size, .80, in the meta-analysis suggests that systemic and student outcomes improved using the RTI large-scale field-based models (Burns et al., 2005).

According to Burns and Ysseldyke (2005), the four large-scale models demonstrated large effects for improving student learning and systemic variables such as reducing the number of children referred to and placed into special education. However, more research was needed in the area of leadership because the need for leadership is not restricted to initial implementation of RTI, but is perhaps more important for sustaining RTI practices, (Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; Hilton, 2007).

VanDerHeyden, Witt, and Gilbertson (2007) examined the effects of implementing a systematic RTI model STEEP (Witt, 2007) on the identification and evaluation of children for special education. Using a multiple baseline design, a systematic model of assessment and intervention was introduced in consecutive years for five elementary

schools in a district. The researchers examined the effects of the RTI model on the number of evaluations conducted, percentage of evaluated children who qualified for services, and proportion of identified children by sex and ethnicity before and after implementation of the model. They found that the cost analyses indicated that resources devoted to traditional assessment were reduced and replaced by direct assessment, intervention, and consultation services in classrooms. The data showed that fewer children were evaluated because the decision-making team discussed fewer children needing evaluation based on the STEEP data. The researchers stated that one finding that may have important practical implications of RTI effectiveness in applied settings was the degree to which the team followed the available STEEP data. Because RTI relies on data-based decisions to improve outcomes, investigations of extraneous factors influencing team decisions are important lines of future research (VanderHeyden, Witt & Gilbertson. 2007).

In an RTI research summary, Hughes and Dexter (2011) found 13 field studies of large-scale RTI programs. They reviewed studies that (a) were published in a peer-reviewed journal or edited textbooks, (b) employed instruction or intervention in at least two Tiers of an RTI program for students experiencing academic or behavioral difficulties, and (c) provided quantifiable measures of student academic/behavioral outcomes and/or systemic outcomes (e.g., special education referrals).

The 13 RTI programs included in their review included seven problem-solving and five standard protocol forms of RTI - one used a combination of both. All of the studies were conducted in elementary schools, with four extending data collection into

Grade 8 or above. Nine of the 13 studies measured variables related to academic achievement: four studies measured reading outcomes, three studies reported math outcomes, one study focused on academically related behaviors (e.g., time on task, task completion, task comprehension), and one study focused on general academic performance (e.g., level and rate on statewide achievement test). Six of the 13 studies included variables related to special education referral and placement rates. They also examined the type and quality of the research designs used, which included single-case (i.e., A-B design), historical control, quasi-experimental, and descriptive.

The researchers found that studies examining the impact of RTI on academic achievement or performance reported some level of improvement. However, the research conducted on these studies mainly compared pre and post student outcomes before implementing and after implementing RTI, rather than using control groups.

Furthermore, with regard to impact of RTI programs on special education referral and placement rates, it appears that overall rates remained fairly constant, with few studies showing slight decreases. The researchers indicated that firm conclusions about referral/placement rates were difficult to make because many studies did not clearly describe how they identified nonresponders. Several supporting factors appeared necessary for improving implementation of RTI programs. These factors, constant in most of the studies, included: extensive and ongoing professional development, administrative support, teacher buy-in, and adequate meeting time for coordination.

In summary, many of these researchers characterize the research base for establishing the impact of various RTI models as emerging. More longitudinal efficacy

research is needed, as well as an examination of the factors necessary for developing and sustaining RTI. This research base establishes that more schools and districts are embracing and are implementing RTI. There is also evidence of a reduction in the number of students identified as needing special education services, though some of this is attributed to the length of time it takes multidisciplinary teams to make decisions and also the process of going through the various tiered interventions (Burns, 2007; Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; Burns et al., 2005; Fuchs et al., 2003; Hughes & Dexter, 2011; VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007).

Finally, there is evidence of effectiveness based on improved student outcomes attributed to the implementation of an RTI process. However, for each of these analyses, there is not a clear discussion of extraneous factors that may or may not be influencing implementation efforts. The discussions are focused on the process or procedural aspects of RTI but little information is provided about the substantive aspects of RTI such as fidelity of implementing the RTI approach as a whole. When trying to understand the substantive aspects of RTI, we can look at factors that may influence implementation effort.

Factors that Influence Implementation of Education Reform

After nearly 20 years of large-scale reform, it is clear that implementing multiple kinds of innovations requires systemic reform (Kozleski & Huber, 2010). Sustaining performance requires building capacity at all levels of the system so that the organization facilitates individual and collective learning and feedback (Kozleski & Huber, 2010).

There are factors that enhance or inhibit the implementation of any reform including RTI.

For instance, Hollenbeck (2007) suggests that resources and training are necessary for RTI implementation while, Teddlie and Reynolds (2000) indicates that leadership is vital to support RTI implementation. Fuchs and Deshler (2007) also propose that professional development, administrative support, district support, and time are important factors to consider when implementing RTI. However, to understand these factors with respect to RTI, we need to look a bit more closely at studies of comprehensive school reform (CSR) to get a fuller sense of how factors influence implementation.

Borman, Hewes, Overman and Brown (2003) conducted the most extensive examination of CSRs. They conducted a meta-analysis of 29 widely implemented CSR models. They looked at more than 800 studies and identified a subset of 232 that assessed models' effects on students' test performance. The effectiveness of the CSR was based on quality of the evidence, quantity of the evidence, and statistically significant and positive results. They found that effects of CSR such as Direct Instruction, School Development Program, High Schools That Work, and Success for All were statistically significant, meaningful, and appear to be greater than the effects of other interventions, such as Title 1 funded pull-out programs designed to serve similar purposes and populations. In other words, implementing a system-wide change results in more overall and sustained student improvement than implementing a few interventions.

Several reform efforts have been initiated to improve American education since the 1980s (Borman et al., 2003; Datnow, et al., 2005; Desimone, 2002). RTI emphasizes a scientifically based whole school reform model (Borman et al., 2003; Datnow, 2000; Datnow, et al., 2003; Datnow et al., 2005; Desimone, 2002; McChesney & Hertling,

2000). Borman et al., (2003) state that the purpose of a reform is to “. . . reorganize and revitalize entire schools rather than on implementing a number of specialized, and potentially uncoordinated, school improvement initiatives” (p. 126). Whole school improvement involves reforming instruction, assessment, classroom management, professional development, parental involvement, school management, and curriculum (Desimone, 2002; Sterbinsky Ross, & Redfield, 2006).

A great deal has been written about the factors that affect the implementation of whole school reform initiatives, in particular the comprehensive school reform (CSR) models such as RTI. The CSR movement represents one of the most rigorous efforts at broad-scale school improvement in American educational history (May & Supovitz, 2006). Following the theory that coherence among programs and policies is more effective than individual programmatic reforms (Smith & O’Day, 1991), CSR providers offer a comprehensive set of instructional expertise, school reorganization techniques, curriculum materials, and improvement strategies that are designed to build school capacity and improve student learning (Supovitz & Taylor, 2005). Since we have literature on CSR, we can use those findings, as a guide for what factors might be important in implementation of RTI.

Researchers have studied implementation factors of the different CSR models in order to determine how to effectively implement and sustain reform efforts. The essential factors that enhance reform implementation are: teacher buy-in, leadership, school culture, professional development and teacher knowledge, accountability mandates, teaching and learning, parent involvement, and funding and resources (Datnow &

Castellano, 2001; Datnow et al., 2005; Desimone, 2000, 2002; Kirby, Berends, & Naftel, 2001; Smith, Maxwell, Lowther, Hacker, Bol, & Nunnery, 1997; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). My research will focus on the practitioner level of RTI implementation because these areas address my research questions. There are some other factors that affect implementation of reform efforts, such as funding, but these are not under direct manipulation by educators and go beyond the scope of this research.

Teacher buy-in

Teachers' beliefs, attitudes and priorities (teacher buy-in) are linked very closely to their classroom behavior. Richardson (1996) states that, "Attitudes and beliefs are a subset of a group of constructs that name, define and describe the structure and content of mental states that are thought to drive a person's actions" (p.102). Teacher buy-in and commitment impacts reform implementation (Datnow, 2000; Datnow et al., 2005; Datnow & Stringfield, 2000; Desimone, 2000; Sterbinsky et al., 2006; Vernez, Karam, Mariano, & DeMartini, 2006). For teachers to become substantially engaged in implementation, they must first buy into the general premise of the reform (Datnow & Castellano, 2000). In a study by Berends (2000) on teacher-reported effects on New American Schools Design, he found that teacher support and engagement in whole school designs was critical for its success. In this study, he examined teacher background characteristics, school demographic characteristics, schools' implementation factors and teachers' reports about their support of the design. He examined four dependent variables: teacher support for NAS design, implementation of critical design components, teacher judgment about the effects of NAS on student enthusiasm, and achievement and

teacher report of effects of the design on professional growth. He found that teachers who reported good communication by the design team had much more support for the NAS design and higher levels of implementation. These same teachers also indicated benefits to professional growth.

In another study by Datnow (2000) on the effects of politics on school reform at 22 schools, he found that teachers favored policies that were suggested over those that were mandated. Out of the 22 schools, eleven of the schools adopted reforms as a mandate of the district while four adopted a particular reform because the district was “advertising” it. The other seven schools adopted reforms based on principals’ suggestions. Even with the principals’ suggestions, the districts required that the staff vote to adopt the reform model. An 80% percent vote was needed in one school while a 90% leadership vote along with a 60% teacher vote was needed in another. Teachers reported support for reforms that they participated in adopting. Thus, research suggests reforms are more sustainable when districts do not mandate reform adoption, but instead encourage and support teacher buy-in. Teacher buy-in also is essential to reform efforts because it helps maintain reform momentum (Appelbaum & Schwartzbeck, 2002). With respect to RTI implementation, one might ask whether teachers, general education teachers in particular, were part of the adoption process at any given school and whether this affects the implementation process. Because principals’ suggestions appear to influence teacher buy-in, the enthusiasm and training provided by administrators may play a role in sustaining teacher efforts and the overall implementation of reform.

Leadership

Given the requirements of NCLB, there is great need for schools to identify procedures that will facilitate the accomplishment of AYP (Kovaleski & Glew, 2006). This expectation to meet AYP suggests a collaborative role for problem-solving teams because such efforts seem to work best in situations, which mandated change intersects with consumers' desire to make change (Kovaleski, 2002). Hence, top-down validation processes to initiate system change, where the leaders take the initiative of ensuring success, seem to work better at ensuring effective implementation of programs (Kovaleski, 2002).

According to Sindelar et al. (2006), districts that show strong commitment to a reform recognize schools for adopting new practices and take measures to ensure that principals follow through. Both actions have been linked to sustained use of reforms. Teddlie and Reynolds (2000) determined that effective schools exhibit effective leadership; the same is true of schools engaged in reform efforts. Specifically, the components of effective principal leadership include being firm and purposeful, involving others in the process, exhibiting instructional leadership, monitoring frequently, and selecting and replacing staff (Hilton, 2007; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000).

Datnow et al. (2005) conducted a longitudinal case study to examine the CSR implementation process in 12 schools to identify key factors, including district and site leadership, that support the implementation of CSR. The results suggest that both district and principal leadership is needed to sustain CSR implementation (Datnow et al., 2005). Kirby et al. (2001) also determined that implementation levels are higher for schools in

which teachers perceive a high level of principal leadership and involvement. Both site leadership and district support impact the success of the reform implementation and ensure the sustainability of the reform (Datnow, 2000, 2005; Datnow & Castellano, 2001; Datnow & Stringfield, 2000; Datnow et al., 2003; Datnow et al., 2005; Kirby et al., 2001; Smith et al., 1997; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000).

Many local education agencies (LEAs) are moving to system models that attempt to regulate not only what principals do, but also how they do it (Kozleski & Huber, 2010). In regards to RTI implementation and sustainability at a given school site, leadership is necessary to promote and support reform efforts. RTI implementation requires principals and other leaders understand the underlying principles of RTI, and lead the instructional and cultural changes that are required to install and sustain RTI models (Kozleski & Huber, 2010). Unfortunately, research shows that leaders and general educators have limited information about RTI (Hougen, 2008; McCombes-Tolis & Spear-Swerling, 2011; Schwartz, Blue, McDonald and Pace, 2009).

Educators' knowledge and professional development

Appropriate professional development is a necessary part of professional progress and can provide relevant knowledge to sustain any given reform effort. To obtain long-term implementation success, sustained continual professional development is required (Lose, 2007). Smith et al. (1997) studied early implementation success and found that teachers are more satisfied with reform efforts when they are provided with initial training. Furthermore, ongoing professional development throughout the implementation process facilitates reform satisfaction among teachers (Smith et al., 1997). To experience

program growth and sustain reform efforts, schools should engage in developing professional and management skills for all staff members by providing school staff with ongoing professional development (Desimone, 2000; Slavin, 2004; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000).

Professional development should be relevant and appropriate providing knowledge and skills required for the success of the initiative and encouraging the staff to incorporate new ideas and materials into their teaching. Schools implementing RTI should set structures in place to facilitate on-going relevant professional development to faculty and staff in order to sustain implementation efforts (Desimone, 2000; Slavin, 2004; Sullivan & Long, 2010; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Stakeholders include, teachers, administrators, school psychologists, paraprofessionals, and district leadership teams.

In an exploratory study by Sullivan and Long (2010), a national sample of 557 school psychologists was surveyed regarding training, involvement, and perceptions of RTI. The results indicate that practitioners engaged in multiple training experiences via a variety of modalities. The overwhelming majority of respondents (92.3%) indicated that they had received some formal or informal training on RTI; many indicated training in a variety of formats. Most reported they had received training via workshops or conference presentations (76.7%), followed by site-based in-services (51.7%), graduate coursework (30.6%), and supervised fieldwork experiences (20.9%). Of those practitioners reporting practicing for less than 5 years, 58.79% indicated that they had received graduate-level course work and 37.58% completed fieldwork in this domain. In contrast, among those

practitioners in the field more than 5 years, less than 12% had received formal graduate training. The results indicate that newer staff may be prepared for RTI while experienced staff has far less training on RTI implementation.

Research suggests that general education teachers seem to have little to no knowledge of the implementation of RTI upon employment (Hougen, 2008; McCombes-Tolis & Spear-Swerling, 2011; Schwarts, et al., 2009). At the university level, this need demands that teacher educators impart the correct knowledge and skills to pre-service teacher candidates. Hougen (2008) asserts that pre-service teachers can benefit from the opportunity to apply RTI principles and techniques as part of their professional preparation.

McCombes-Tolis and Spear-Swerling (2011) found that pre-service teachers had limited or no exposure to RTI. The purpose of the inquiry was to identify how thoroughly degree-granting institutions in their state (Connecticut) prepared elementary educators to serve students' literacy needs from a response-to-intervention perspective. Specifically, their study focused on a review of one state's teacher preparation practices and (1) whether pre-service elementary educators were provided with the opportunity to develop assessment and lesson-planning skills associated with the five essential components of reading and (2) whether these educators were being introduced to key RTI concepts. The researchers gathered 29 syllabi from nine institutions, three were public and while six were private.

From studying course syllabi, the researchers provided evidence that candidates were not being prepared to understand key assessment and instructional terms, concepts,

and applications associated with effective RTI practices in reading. They found that procedural knowledge in the content area (in this case reading) was adequate and the pre-service teachers demonstrated their knowledge through assessment and completion of course requirements. The concept of formative assessment was omitted from more than two thirds of course syllabi (82.8%), and no course syllabus referenced the concept or term *response to intervention*, the concept or term tiered instructional models, or any literacy progress monitoring measures. One course referenced the concept of progress monitoring (3.4%). As school districts work to develop comprehensive prevention and intervention models of RTI, the need for elementary educators to understand the research, assessment, and instructional tenets of such models is immediate. Moreover, if elementary educators begin their careers without this kind of knowledge, district administrators and principals are forced to provide extensive professional development before implementation of RTI can even commence (McCombes-Tolis & Spear-Swerling, 2011). RTI has been researched and implemented in schools now for more than a decade so it is surprising that research suggests many teacher educators have yet to embed the core features of RTI in literacy content areas. Because these results are from a single state, there is need for more research in this area. More so, there is need for research on the effects on implementation efforts when practitioner knowledge of a reform is lacking.

Schwartz, Blue, McDonald and Pace (2009) developed an RTI Survey to gather information about teacher educators' knowledge about RTI, the sources of their knowledge base, and their plans for teacher training in light of the RTI mandate. Eighty-four faculty members from colleges and universities throughout New York State participated in this study. Participants were surveyed; respondents' expertise spanned

general and special education, and included all developmental levels: early childhood, childhood, and adolescence.

The researchers found that special educators knew more about RTI compared to general education teachers. Individuals with dual specializations (general education and special education) had an even more extensive knowledge base. Individuals who specialized in general education had a lower percentage of RTI knowledge than their special education counterparts. When examining faculty knowledge of RTI, 72% of respondents reported that they were "very familiar" or "familiar" with RTI. Although a majority indicated a high level of familiarity, it was a concern that five years after the introduction of RTI in IDEIA (2004), 28% of teacher educators report that they were “somewhat familiar” or “not familiar at all.”

Mellard and Johnson (2008) state that the establishment of the RTI model represents a major shift in the roles and responsibilities of educators and their professional development, and greater collaboration between general and special educators. These changes extend to teacher education programs and the need for faculty to learn more about RTI so they can correctly transform their pre-service programs. Furthermore, research on how limited RTI knowledge affects general education teachers' implementation of RTI is lacking in the literature.

School culture

School culture plays an important role in the success of any educational reform effort. School culture is the stream of norms, values, beliefs, traditions and rituals built up over time (Peterson & Deal, 1998). Morgan (1986) reminds us that culture is not imposed

on a social setting or institution, such as a school, but that it develops through the course of social interactions. Schools generally want a culture that supports work and high student achievement (Brown, 2004; Goldring, 2002). School culture influences how teachers, school administrators, students, and other school stakeholders render schooling into meaningful and actionable practices. School culture is constructed socially by the interactions between individual in the school and community, and is shaped by what they deem important to them. Brown (2004) noted the following ingredients for a productive school culture:

- An inspiring vision and challenging mission
- A curriculum and modes of learning clearly linked to the vision and mission
- Sufficient time for teachers and students to do their work well
- Close supportive relationships
- Leadership that encourages and supports trust
- Data-driven decision making (p. 24)

Similarly, Teddlie and Reynolds (2000) state that the components for developing a positive school culture should include creating a shared vision, facilitating an orderly school environment, and using positive reinforcement. To sustain implementation of programs in one's school, Hollenbeck (2007) states that the school should maintain a supportive environment with opportunities for collaboration between peers, provide administrative backing, encourage student cooperation, and establish a link to student outcomes. School leaders from every level are key to shaping school culture (Deal & Peterson, 1998). Principals communicate core values in their everyday work. Teachers

then reinforce these values through their actions and words. When selecting a reform, schools need to match the reform approach to the culture, beliefs, and needs of the school (Datnow et al., 2005; Smith, et al., 1997; Sterbinsk, et al., 2006).

Datnow and Stringfield (2000) conducted a study to identify characteristics that increase the success of reform implementation. In this study, they determined that when facilitating a school change environment, schools proceed through three key stages: adopting the reform design, implementing the reform, and ensuring reform sustainability. They concluded that schools are more successful in implementing the reform if they choose a reform design that is based on existing conditions and the school culture. To implement and sustain CSR reform, the program needs to become part of the fabric of a school, and not be perceived as another passing fad (Datnow & Springfield, 2000). Schools with shared vision and cultures of communication and shared decision making, and schools that involve teachers in the design of an innovation are more likely to sustain innovations (Sindelar et al. 2006).

To implement RTI successfully, schools must match the values and beliefs of the stakeholders with the values and beliefs associated with RTI. Context sets the stage for considering the cultural nature of learning and implementations for educational professionals (Artiles & Bal, 2008). When reform fails to account for the powerful ways in which cultural practices intersect with regulatory and policy mandates, new mandates rapidly lose their potential for meaningful education change (Kozleski & Smith, 2009). This is an important yet often overlooked factor in transformation of systems for RTI (Kozleski & Huber, 2010). If compatibility exists, it is more likely that RTI will be

sustainable beyond initial implementation. For some schools, this may mean restructuring or redesigning their school culture.

In the study by Sullivan and Long (2010), a group of psychologists was asked to provide their perceptions of the broader impact of RTI at their sites. Of the psychologists employed at RTI sites, 68.3% believed that it improved student achievement, 39.3% believed that it improved school culture, and 38.7% supposed that it improved school climate. More than a quarter reported their perception that RTI had made no impact on student achievement, and 10%–15% felt that it had no effect on school climate or culture. Interesting to note is that 10.5% and 17.2% of respondents felt that the implementation of RTI had negatively influenced school culture and climate, respectively.

Teachers' perspectives of the core curriculum

Teachers and staff members need to set high expectations for students and themselves. When implementing a reform, effective schools focus on learning, which includes mastering academic standards and maximizing the learning time to meet AYP. In other words, teachers translate reform into classroom practices (Datnow et al., 2005).

Tier I instruction, sometimes referred to as the “core” curriculum, must be grounded in scientifically based research (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). One of the central assumptions of RTI is that students are exposed to appropriate curriculum and instruction in the general education environment (Sullivan & Long, 2010). Lack of effective general education instruction and curriculum undermines the basic framework of this approach. If students are not provided with adequate opportunities to learn, educational disadvantage cannot be ruled out (Sullivan & Long, 2010).

Rinaldi, Higgins-Averill, and Stuart (2011) conducted a study in which they looked at the perspectives of educators on the RTI model. Over a three-year time span, the authors interviewed educators at an urban elementary school about their perceptions of RTI, tracking the development and effectiveness of RTI implementation. They indicated that teachers' perception of RTI grew positive. The study was conducted through a university-school partnership that involved these elementary school educators from the initial planning through the implementation of the process while providing ongoing professional development. In their findings, Rinaldi, Higgins-Averill, and Stuart discuss how changes were made in the core curriculum. One general education teacher said that they now had a core curriculum that they used progress monitoring and were able to notice a change in grades and intervene early. That the teachers now focused on the students needs and instead of just having one curriculum that was used for everybody everywhere, *differentiation and delivery might change* depending on the groups of kids they had (Rinaldi, Higgins-Averill, & Stuart, 2011).

However, in their discussion the authors failed to provide information as to whether the school checked for fidelity of implementation at the core curriculum level. Moreover, from the participant's remarks it came across as though the teachers were making their own decision as to how to differentiate instruction with little concern about fidelity of implementing the intervention.

Furthermore, if interventions are not implemented with fidelity, lack of responsiveness cannot be assumed to reflect an intrinsic learning problem (Sullivan & Long, 2010). Although the vast majority of practitioners agree that ensuring intervention

integrity is essential, few actually document this information (Cochrane & Laux, 2007). Given the evidence that most teachers implement interventions with less than 10% integrity (Wickstrom, Jones, LaFleur, & Witt, 1998), there appears to be a need for expertise among those leading implementation efforts to ensure fidelity. In their research Wickstrom et al., (1998) assessed the severity of a child's problem behavior, treatment acceptability, and verbal interaction style. They manipulated verbal interactions to measure the effects of collaborative verses prescriptive consultation on behavior. The results indicated that there was a decrease in student problem behavior and that teachers used the intervention stimulus (collaborative consultation) 64% of the time. However, researchers observed that the teachers implemented the treatment with integrity only 4% of the time. As RTI becomes increasingly widespread, it is imperative that practitioners have the necessary training in ensuring the appropriateness and integrity of not only the interventions but also the RTI process as a whole (Sullivan & Long, 2010).

Fidelity of implementation

Probably the most challenging goal districts initially develop in the RTI process is how to maintain and assure fidelity of implementation of the system-wide initiative. Fidelity of implementation or treatment integrity requires that teachers provide instruction, progress monitoring, and data-based decision making according to the research-based method prescribed or to a best-practice protocol. Furthermore, fidelity of implementation is vital to the programs' success.

Some researchers have called for the need for research in the area of teacher fidelity within the RTI model (Jones, Wickstrom, & Friman, 1997; Noell & Gansle, 2006). Noell

and Gansle (2006) reveal that few studies address the extent to which fidelity of intervention is assessed and documented. They further assert that fidelity of all aspects of the RTI process must be assessed. Without these checks and balances, the RTI process becomes a hollow shell that produces meaningless, unverifiable outcomes (Noell & Gansle, 2006). Failure to implement the required interventions undermines RTI's main goal of providing needed services to children at the point of critical need without having to wait for a formal assessment or evaluation (Noell & Gansle, 2006).

Fidelity checks can be done in several ways. The use of performance feedback has been acclaimed as one of the ways of measuring treatment integrity (Jones, Wickstrom, & Friman, 1997). Jones, Wickstrom, & Friman, (1997) evaluated the effects of performance feedback on levels of treatment integrity in school-based behavioral consultation. Their participants were three teachers employed in a residential home who were to implement a treatment to children. The teacher and child behaviors were monitored across three conditions-baseline, traditional consultation and consultation with performance feedback. Their initial finding during baseline was that treatment integrity ranged from 9% to 36% before performance feedback. These percentages increased after performance feedback to 60 to 83%. The treatment which included the reinforcement of student on task behavior, continued to be implemented with fidelity as long as the teachers were able to receive feedback on how they were doing during implementation.

Although both common sense and research support the concept of fidelity of implementation to ensure an intervention's successful outcome, the practical challenges associated with achieving high levels of fidelity are well documented (Gresham, et al.,

2000). When researching the effectiveness of an intervention, it is critical to be able to report the fidelity with which it was implemented so that any resulting gains in student achievement can be accurately attributed to the intervention under investigation.

Davis-Bianco (2010) describes how one school district established a model of RTI including three mechanisms to enhance data-driven instruction and fidelity of implementation through the use of a student intervention tracking form, reading coaches, and teacher-made video clips. The student intervention tracking form used in this study, is a form for each student on which is documented the interventions attempted, frequency (# of days/week), duration (# of minutes/session), intensity (individual or # of students/group), and student response to the intervention. Each week, the reading coach reviewed the student intervention tracking form of students receiving tiered instruction. If a teacher was particularly challenged with a student's lack of progress, was not implementing interventions as prescribed, or was not recording those interventions, the coach would offer assistance. Since video cameras were readily available in the school, the school used the opportunity to train the teaching assistants to record lessons during tiered instruction. The school then took the video clips teachers felt were particularly instructive and burned them on disks, to be categorized and shared throughout the district for easy viewing by peers. The researcher recommended more research in the area of fidelity of implementation so that schools that are attempting to develop fidelity checks can have a model with which to develop their documents.

This section of the literature review highlighted some of the important aspects of school structure that aid implementation of educational reforms. By reviewing some of

the factors that are important for implementation of CSR, I was able to relate these same factors to implementation of RTI. These factors include leadership, school culture, teacher buy-in, teacher knowledge, curriculum selection and fidelity of implementation, and are vital for the implementation of RTI (Datnow & Castellano, 2001; Datnow et al., 2005; Datnow & Stringfield, 2000; Desimone, 2000; 2002; Kirby, Berends, & Naftel, 2001; Kozleski & Huber, 2010; McCombes-Tolis & Spear-Swerling, 2011; Rinaldi, Higgins-Averill, & Stuart, 2011; Schwarts, Blue, McDonald & Pace, 2009; Sullivan & Long, 2010;). The next section will be a review of my conceptual framework. These are the theories and concepts that come into play as I attempt to investigate the importance of the discussed factors in the implementation of RTI.

Conceptual Framework

Qualitative researchers many times use theories and concepts as a guide for their research. These theoretical and conceptual frameworks serve as a base from which to launch arguments and support findings (Glensen, 2006). Mason (2002) argues, “theories are drawn on repeatedly as ideas are formulated, tried out, modified, rejected or polished” (p 180). In this section, I will discuss some of the theories that guided this study. Each theory will be tied to the research questions and the overall purpose for this research.

Theoretical framework

For a multi-tiered model such as RTI to be considered successful, one has to consider the extent to which the core curriculum (Tier I) brings increasing numbers of students to proficiency, and the extent to which the added procedures (e.g., data analysis and problem-solving teaming) and extensive supplemental programs (i.e., standard

protocol interventions) increase student proficiency toward the overall goals set by NCLB (Kovalesky, 2007). The underlying assumption is that proper implementation of interventions leads to desirable outcomes.

In this study, I adopted a theoretical lens that frames appropriate implementation of a system-wide educational reform as being both individually as well as socially constructed. Furthermore, I considered these levels of constructions as undergoing some sort of conflict or tension during the adoption process. Three distinct theoretical perspectives come into play as I analyzed the RTI phenomenon. These three theoretical perspectives were: structural-functionalism (Kingsbury & Scanzoni, 1993), conflict theory (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), and cultural theory (Deal & Peterson, 2009). This research is informed by a theoretical assumption that for a program to be implemented with fidelity, the culture of the school, the ideologies of individual teachers, and their knowledge of the program are key ingredients. I chose the hypothetico-deductive method in which my theoretical propositions are generated in advance of my research process (Mason, 2002) because, as has been stated in the literature review of educational reforms, school culture, knowledge, and individual beliefs shape educators' daily activity in the classroom and school as a whole.

From the perspective of *structural-functionalism* theory, society is seen as a structure with interrelated parts that function as whole (Kingsbury & Scanzoni, 1993). Research supports the notion that teacher leaders and other members of the school must be involved, individually performing distinct roles in creating and supporting a culture of a school including any form of cultural shift if the shift is to take hold (Beachum &

Dentith, 2004; Bruffee, 1999; Langon-Fox & Tan 2004). In addition to looking at a school system as a society that functions as a whole, it is important to understand the intricate details of the individuals within this society and how their individual experiences come into play to shape the structure. Individual teachers have individual roles in forming and shaping any system-wide change. Here I took an antipositivism stance that qualitative methods such as interviews and journals can best capture some individual stories and highlight some of the intricate details and experiences during implementation efforts.

Through the lens of *cultural theory* (Deal & Peterson, 2009) I explored the school system, also deemed a society in itself, which has various constituent elements that function together as a whole. Shared vision, values, goals, beliefs and faith in school, define school culture (Deal & Peterson, 2009; Fullan, 2005; Stolp, 1994). These elements also drive the operation of a school, including how faculty, staff, and leaders, as well as its core curriculum, are selected. The selection of core programs should blend in with the specific views of the stakeholders in addition to meeting the requirements of being evidence based. When trying to understand how schools/districts select their core curriculum, it is important to understand how the school system functions and the driving force or underlying presumptions necessary to the school's decision-making process. This driving force -school culture- may influence fidelity of implementation of a system-wide change. This theoretical framework shaped my study by helping me to view this micro society-the school- as having various parts joined together that were crucial in shaping the school's philosophy for it to function cohesively.

Conflict theory goes further to include the dynamics of social change (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Bryk, Lee and Holland (1993) found that a sense of community (culture) was a key factor in cultivating a sense of excellence in school. A conflict in the culture, such as an absence of established values, results in teachers and students working independently and doing different things. Fidelity of implementation requires collaboration, teamwork, consultation and support, to assure uniformity, or at the very least, commonality. A school culture that does not support collaboration may be in conflict with the components of RTI that require the formation of a multi-disciplinary team for decision making on student progress and placement.

In line with the conflict theory, and moving from school as a whole to the individual level, there are two things that will inform implementation of a program. One is the teachers' and administrators' ideologies and beliefs. The other is teachers' and administrators' knowledge of the program. In reference to individual beliefs, Thompson (1984) claimed that teacher patterns and behaviors are a result of consciously held beliefs acting as a 'driving force'. He added that practice could be the result of unconscious beliefs and intuitions evolving out of experience. He further added that the phenomenon of teachers modifying new ideas and practices by adapting them to fit existing practices, is well established. To what extent such modifications can influence fidelity of implementing a well defined or scripted practice or program is unknown. Thompson suggests that more research is needed on the stability of teacher beliefs because change in practice is not always associated with change in beliefs. A conflict between beliefs and practice may hinder implementation efforts.

In understanding ideology, we need to understand that our ideology is grounded in what we experience socially. When we socialize, our thoughts, feelings and experiences become solidified into relatively stable deep structured systems of ideas, which allow us to engage with others at any given social level (Gates, 2006). These become ideologies - covert systems of ideas expressed through social activity (Gates, 2006). Our ideologies either make us more similar or different. Ideology is a structure of ideas that places demands on us to conform and to believe things that fit the structural framework of the dominant ideological position (Gates, 2006). If the dominant ideological position is dictated by the school culture, then the school culture may structure the teachers' ideologies. It is important for schools to have a culture that supports implementation of reforms especially when the culture of the school has a profound impact on the teachers' ideologies. In theory, when a school does not have a dominant ideological position in support of educational reform, then the probability of implementation failure is likely.

Furthermore, our knowledge and ideologies are influenced and or shaped by instructor philosophies and academic courses. Our knowledge of a program makes it easier for us to implement that program. This is important especially in the selection of professional development for faculty and staff. When a school equips its faculty and staff with the required knowledge to implement an educational reform, the school is more likely to enhance its implementation efforts while limiting the challenges that come with implementation. If our ideologies are shaped by what we learn, then incorporating professional development that supports a particular reform effort, especially one that emphasize its benefits, would help shape teachers belief that the reform effort is

beneficial. Figure 2.1 is my Theoretical Framework, the lens through which I analyzed the participants' perspectives on RTI implementation in their school.

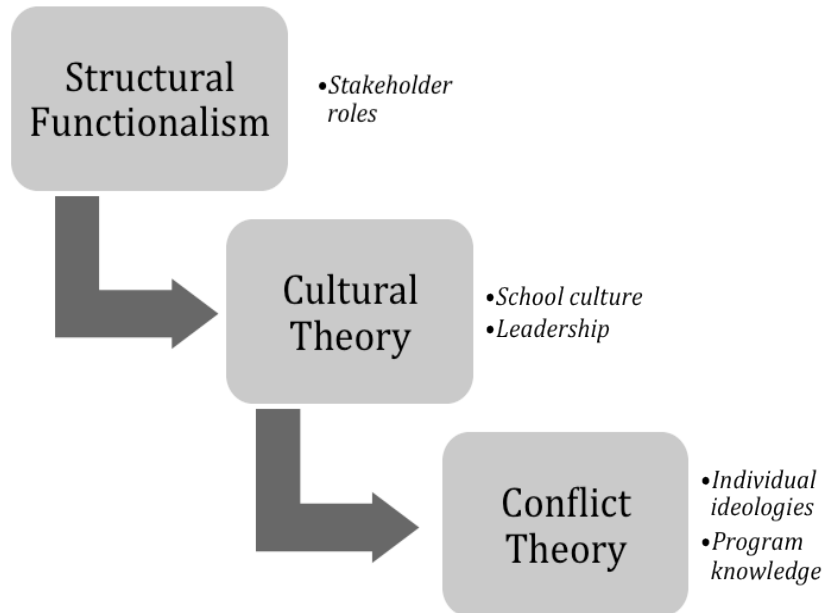


Fig. 2.1. Theoretical Framework.

These theories (structural-functionalism, conflict and cultural) and concepts (school culture, individual ideologies and knowledge) guided me in answering my overarching question, which is: How much of the current implementation of RTI is influenced by school culture, personal beliefs, and knowledge of RTI as perceived by teachers and administrators? For the purpose of this research study, my conceptual framework was centered on teachers' beliefs, teachers' knowledge and school culture in

general, and their impact on implementation of RTI as viewed through the lens of structural-functionalism, conflict and cultural theories. These three components, school culture, teacher belief and knowledge, are vital in ensuring proper implementation of RTI. If what goes on daily at a school is guided by what is important to the stakeholders, then the selection as well as the consequent assessment and maintenance of a program may be based on the culture of the school, the different ideological and pedagogical beliefs of the stakeholders, and the participants background knowledge of the program to be implemented. For a program to get the desired results it should be implemented with fidelity ensuring that it is delivered as the program developer intended for it to be delivered. However, variations in its delivery may result in unintended outcomes. If there are indeed differences in delivery then it may be affected by what a school system considers important.

Summary

The literature review included an overview of RTI, the factors that contribute to reform implementation, and the theories supporting the factors that influence reform implementation. In the first section, some of the educational reform acts were discussed, followed by definitions and descriptions of RTI models. In the second section, I reviewed key factors that affect reform implementation: teacher buy-in, district and site level leadership, school culture and climate, and professional development. Additionally, I presented research on RTI models that indicated that large-scale RTI implementation significantly affects student outcomes and reduces referral of students to special education programs (Burns, 2007; Burns et al., 2005; Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; Sullivan

& Long, 2010; VanderHeyden, Witt & Gilbertson, 2007) however, many of the studies are wrought with validity threats (Fuchs et al., 2003; Hughes & Dexter, 2011).

In the final section, I linked the theoretical framework of structural-functionalism, cultural theory, and conflict theory to the concepts of school culture, leadership, teacher belief and knowledge. I emphasized how these theories and concepts play out in the school setting and how I incorporated the theories and concepts in my study.

Between the years 2005-2010 several researchers have focused on how states are progressing on implementing RTI. Their main focus have been on numbers-how many states are implementing RTI, which model they use and if they have a well developed implementation plan coming from the state departments (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010; Berkley et al., 2009). This focus on numbers is important because it tells us that despite the challenges of implementing RTI, many states are still ensuring that their schools use RTI.

From the literature review it is clear that there are several components that influence effective implementation of any given reform effort, including teacher buy-in, teacher knowledge, teacher beliefs, leadership and school culture. The literature clearly shows that many elementary education teachers are not exposed to the tenets of RTI (Hougen, 2008; McCombes-Tolis & Spear-Swerling, 2011; Schwarts, Blue, McDonald & Pace, 2009). How the lack of knowledge contributes to the implementation struggles has not been investigated. It is essential to know the long-term effects of lack of knowledge to educational reform efforts. Therefore, there is need for more research on the effects of limited elementary teacher knowledge of RTI (Schwartz, Blue, McDonald & Pace, 2009)

in an effort to understand how this lack of knowledge affects implementation efforts. We need more qualitative studies on implementation efforts (Davis-Bianco, 2010).

The literature suggests we do not know the effects of school culture on implementation efforts of educational reforms (Datnow et al., 2005). How the implementation of RTI has shaped or changed the dynamics of the school as is seen through the eyes of the practitioners is an important topic of inquiry.

If school culture, teacher knowledge and beliefs, leadership, teacher buy-in, are important to the implementation of RTI, the questions that still need to be answered are: What specific role does school culture, personal beliefs and knowledge of RTI play in the implementation of RTI? What other key factors significantly impact and facilitate the success of RTI implementation? What factors help schools sustain RTI implementation efforts long-term?

Ball and Trammell, (2011) stated that much of the research on RTI focused on conceptual and logistic issues related to RTI with many studies documenting the effectiveness of specific interventions for remediating skill deficits in reading. This is because RTI is multifaceted and with many components of this service delivery model, it is difficult to combine these many variables to examine effectiveness and this multifaceted nature of RTI has challenged educational researchers (Hill, King, Lemons, & Partanen, 2012). The many components of RTI make controlling for commonalities and measuring critical aspects difficult (Torgesen, 2009). Hence many researchers will continue to target specific aspects of RTI to evaluate effectiveness.

Furthermore, school districts may be reluctant to allow researchers to play an integral role in Tier I efforts or share school data collected for Tier I (Hill, King, Lemons, & Partanen, 2012). The fact that states have taken a local choice approach to RTI implementation (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010) and that inconsistency exists between RTI practices related to effectiveness and equity across schools (Mellard, McKnight & Wood, 2009), it is no wonder the neglect of Tier I may have contributed to a research to practice gap. Therefore, one will find a lot more research done on Tier II and Tier III interventions due to the feasibility of working with a fewer number of students and practitioners, the obvious use of scientifically validated interventions, and the ability to assess, document and monitor progress that is manageable. This study however, was an attempt to delve into the Tier I realm and gather information about implementation at this crucial point of this service delivery model.

Furthermore, this study was centered on the perspectives and opinions of practitioners about RTI implementation at their schools and within their classrooms. I approached this research with the conceptual framework that the selection, assessment, maintenance and consequent sustainability of a program is based on the culture of the school, the different ideological and pedagogical beliefs of the stakeholders, and stakeholders' knowledge of the program.

There seems to be an obvious gap between research and practice. What are we missing as researchers in aiding the implementation of RTI? Most researches address the technical aspects of implementation focusing on program or intervention implementation, assessment of student progress and how RTI is set up in schools. What about the intra-

personal aspects of implementation? What about the social, cultural, and ideological influences of implementation? Education is a social science and implementation of programs and reforms that only focus on the scientific nature of education (technical aspects of delivery) leave out the social aspects of education, which have an equal if not superior influence on implementation efforts. It is for this reason that the premise for conducting this study was to investigate the individual, school and community beliefs and cultural norms that guide their interpretation and implementation of school-wide reforms.

CHAPTER THREE

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Research Question, Design and Rationale

A review of literature revealed extensive research on RTI at the secondary and tertiary level with most research conducted on specific interventions used in Tier III (Brown-Chidsey, 2005; Burns et al., 2005; Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; Hazelkorn et al., 2011; Hughes & Dexter, 2008; Sullivan & Long, 2010; VanderHeyden, Witt & Gilbertson, 2007; VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Barnett, 2005). At the primary level, which is the level targeting general education, there is limited research. In addition, research on RTI is predominantly conducted and consumed by special education researchers and school psychologists (Hazelkorn, et al., 2011; McCombes-Tolis & Spear-Swerling, 2011; Sullivan & Long, 2009). General education teachers have limited information in the available journals they read and may have a lack of interest as a result (Hazelkorn, et al., 2011). How then does this important group of people understand, interpret and implement RTI? Do they embrace it? In what ways does limited information or lack of enthusiasm contribute to the barriers of implementation that researchers have noted? The best way to find out answers to these questions is to interview teachers and administrators and to be present in the places and spaces in which these individuals implement RTI.

The purpose of this study was to explore and gain information about teachers' and administrators' perceptions of RTI, and to evaluate the roles that school culture, personal beliefs, and knowledge of RTI may play in its implementation. In this qualitative study, I looked at various factors at the school level and at the classroom level that influence implementation of RTI. My study was conducted at two schools currently implementing RTI. I used an interpretive case study approach to target the general education teachers who serve the majority of the student population, and the administrators who help guide and support teachers in the implementation of a system-wide change. Interpretive case studies are research studies in which the researcher attempts to understand phenomena by accessing the meaning that participants assign to them (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991) and focusing on their cultural and historical context. In this type of research, the interpretive researcher attempts to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomena being investigated, and acknowledges his or her subjectivity as part of the process (Broadbent, Darke, & Shanks, 1998). The following research questions were addressed:

1. What are administrators' and teachers' understandings of RTI and how RTI is being implemented in their school?
2. What do teachers and administrators perceive as the role of school culture in the implementation of RTI in their school?
3. What do teachers and administrators report as their personal pedagogical beliefs that influence how they implement RTI?

4. What do teachers and administrators report as basic knowledge that they require to implement RTI in their schools?
5. What are some other school related factors that teachers and administrators report as influencing how they implement RTI?

Research design

Qualitative research has become one of the fastest growing research approaches in education today (Hess-Biber & Leavy 2004). Qualitative research methods are used to understand some social phenomena from the perspectives of those involved, while contextualizing issues in their particular socio-cultural-political milieu, and sometimes to transform or change social conditions (Glesne, 2006). Capturing information beyond numerical values, qualitative research methodologies emphasize meaning, understanding, and interpretations. Qualitative researchers collect data and analyze data by identifying patterns that either conform to an already existing theory or that result in a new theory. Finally, even though qualitative researchers look at the relationship among variables, they do not require the testing of hypotheses, nor are they concerned with making generalizations (Lichtman, 2010). The qualitative approach to data collection for this study resulted in obtaining pertinent information at the core of educators' instructional strategies, their perspectives on policy issues, and their opinions about innovative programs. It also provided an understanding of what goes on in the classroom on a day-to-day basis.

In this study I utilized a multi-site interpretive case study methodology. The phenomenon under investigation was RTI a system-wide change that has become one of the largest school reform processes being implemented in districts and schools in America today. Further, given that a school is comprised of a group of individuals whose views and behaviors function together to form what would be considered a school culture (Deal & Peterson, 2009), I focused on the perspectives of teachers and administrators regarding how RTI is being implemented in their respective schools. The teachers' and administrators' lived experiences as they implement RTI are important to understanding some of the challenges and successes they encounter along the way. Insight on RTI, especially how practitioners understand it, their knowledge of what it is, and the training teachers and administrators receive are important in understanding the degree to which practitioners understood, interpreted, and implemented RTI in their schools. Furthermore, their experiences shed light on some of the assumptions and presuppositions by program developers and may aid in future improvements.

I also focused on looking at reading and math core curricula because these were the core curriculum areas that had already developed scientifically validated core curricula. Other courses such as science and social studies are yet to have a variety of well- developed core curricula interventions.

Research Methods and Procedure

Contexts

I used *purposeful criterion sampling* to select my sites (Patton, 2002). The logic behind criterion sampling is to review and study all cases that meet a predetermined criterion of importance. The criterion in this case was schools implementing RTI. This research was conducted in schools already implementing RTI. I targeted schools that had implemented RTI for at least four years. This was because these schools had developed RTI models and therefore had a strategy in place to meet the basic requirements of implementing RTI. Schools at the beginning stages of implementation would not have had all the information to answer the questions for this research.

The search for schools implementing RTI began with contacting The South Carolina State Department of Education (SCSDE). SCSDE had identified districts and schools considered demonstration sites. These sites have been selected based on how long they have been implementing RTI and how well developed their programs seemed to have been. They were considered well developed because they met the basic state requirement for implementing an RTI model. These demonstration sites were my first line of sample selection. I then sent emails to the schools to solicit their participation in the study. Five school districts were contacted. It is important to understand that the process of conducting research at any given school takes a considerable amount of time for the districts' review of research study and eventually accepting researchers to conduct studies at given sites. Three school districts responded, one declined on grounds that they

had several other researchers who conducted similar studies, one took too long for the approval process to come through and one approved the study within the scope of time that was available to conduct the study. I used two schools for this research from a district well known in the state for being pioneers in the implementation of RTI.

Once I had received approval to conduct the study, I met with the director of student services to identify schools in which to conduct the study. The student services director, who was my liaison, helped me gain access to two schools. I indicated that I needed to conduct the study in schools that had implemented RTI for more than four years. The director contacted administrators in four schools. After our initial meeting, she corresponded via email informing me of receiving responses from two principals that had been in touch with her regarding the study. Once two schools were identified, I corresponded with the principals at the schools and the SAT chairs at each school. I gave the principals the criteria for participants at each site. The criteria were: four general education teachers and two administrators. The administration team could be comprised of a principal, SAT chair and/or assistant principal. The general education teachers could be from Kindergarten to grade four. I needed a representative from each grade level. The principals asked for volunteers from each grade level. The principals were able to get in touch with me and I was able to schedule individual interviews immediately.

All the names used in this study including district name, school names and participant names are pseudonyms. This was done to comply with the confidentiality agreement between the participants and the researcher See Appendix A for confidentiality agreement.

Description of the sites: The Latter County School District is home to schools that serve a population of largely low-income individuals. The two schools selected from this school district, however, have different student demographics. The two schools were Barnes Elementary School and Hodges Elementary School.

Barnes elementary has a student population of 480. The student population at Barnes is 28% White, 48% African American 24%, Hispanic and 2% other minorities. Barnes has a 97.4% free and reduced lunch population of students from pre K-5. Barnes has 35 teachers, 24 classified staff, two administrators, and one guidance counselor. The school also has a Language Arts instructional coach, Math instructional coach, and an AmeriCorps full-time nurse and a full-time parent coordinator. Sixty percent of their faculty members have advanced degrees. The mission of the faculty and staff at Barnes Elementary is to “enable all children to achieve their fullest potential and to develop as life-long learners in a culturally diverse society.” (This information was obtained from the school website which cannot be disclosed due to confidentiality agreement).

Hodges Elementary has a student population of 426 students with 73% White, 22% African American, 2% Hispanic and 3% other. The school is at 48% free and reduced lunch. The school has 27 teachers, 14 classified staff, two administrators, and one guidance counselor. The school also has a media specialist, nurse, reading specialist, four primary and elementary interventionists, and a preschool and parent coordinator. 70.4% of the teachers have advanced degrees. Their school mission is “Putting our children first” (Information was obtained from school website which cannot be disclosed due to confidentiality)

Participants

The special education director at Latter School District contacted schools within the district to identify possible research sites. She corresponded with the principals, who selected staff based on the research criteria, which was K-Grade 4. The main participants for this study were administrators and general education teachers. I selected these people because administrators and teachers have the responsibility of implementing programs selected by the school districts. My reason for selecting general education teachers is that this group seemed to be the least informed about an initiative that ideally should be implemented by them. My readings of related research revealed a gap between the research and teachers' knowledge of RTI (Hazelkorn, 2011; McCombes-Tolis & Spear-Swerling, 2011; Schwarts, et al., 2009; Sullivan & Long, 2010). The majority of the people informed about RTI are special education teachers, researchers and school psychologists (McCombes-Tolis & Spear-Swerling, 2011; Sullivan & Long, 2010), yet this initiative should benefit all students, and general education teachers, who serve a majority of students, should be knowledgeable.

Interviews at both sites included the SAT chairs because the special education director recommended them. An SAT typically consists of an administrator, guidance counselor, a general education teacher, a special education teacher, a school nurse, and school psychologist. The team's task is to identify students who experience academic challenges or display behavioral problems that impede their ability to be successful in the classroom. The team meets and discusses strategies to assist this student as soon as a teacher raises concerns. The SAT chair at Barnes was the guidance counselor, while the

one at Hodges was a special education teacher. Interventionists were also included in the interviews in this study. An interventionist is the individual given the task of providing remediation of skills a student requires to be successful at which ever grade the student is. Interventionists are either certified teachers or paraprofessionals who work in small group or individually with struggling students to help these students meet grade level standards. The interventionists were included because they provided supplemental instruction at Tier I to struggling students. The contributions of the SAT chairs and interventionists were important and were noted, however, the findings section will highlight the responses of the administrators and general education teachers because of their roles in implementing the RTI process. The participants of this study included administrators, general education teachers, interventionists, and special education teachers.

In this study, purposeful sampling was used to select the general education teachers within the school for in-depth interviews, and heterogeneous sampling was used for focus group interviews (Patton, 2002). There were several teachers that met the criteria of K-Grade four. The participants from this group of teachers volunteered; one from each grade level. Focus group participants were the individuals who had initially participated in the individual interviews. Each participant received an invitation letter, which explained the nature of the study, the purpose of the study, and how and where the data gathered would be used. See Appendix B for invitation letter.

Description of the participants: There were eight participants from Barnes elementary. These included the principal, assistant principal, one student assistance team (SAT) chair and five teachers. The principal, Gloria, had been a principal at this school

for a year and a half. She had worked in the district for 20 years in various capacities including teaching elementary grades and as an assistant principal. She has a South Carolina teaching certificate in Early Childhood education, and Administration Supervision. Teaching experience, degree and certification of all other participants are summarized in Table 3.1.

There were 11 participants in Hodges elementary school. These included the principal, SAT chairperson, four general education teachers, one special education teacher and four interventionists. The principal, Julie, had been a principal at this school for 13 years. She had worked in the district for 33 years in various capacities including teaching fourth grade and as an assistant principal. She has a South Carolina teacher certificate in Early Childhood education, Administration Supervision and masters in Elementary Education. The qualifications of the rest of the participants are summarized in Table 3.2.

In each school, at least one administrator, four general education teachers, and an SAT chairs at each school were interviewed. I interviewed two principals, both female, eight general education teachers, seven female and one male, four interventionists, -all female, one special education teacher, and two SAT chairs, both female. A detailed biography of each of the participants can be found in Appendix C.

Table 3.1: Teacher Profiles- Barnes Elementary

| <i>Name</i> | <i>Designation</i> | <i>Certification</i> | <i>Grades</i> | <i>Years of experience</i> |
|-------------|---|---|---------------|----------------------------|
| Gloria | Principal | Early Childhood Administration | All | 20 |
| Louise | SAT chair | Early Childhood National Board Certified | All | 28 |
| John | Teacher | Early Childhood | 2 | 22 |
| Susan | Instructional coach | Early Childhood Reading | All | 12 |
| Bob | SAT co- chair/Assistant principal | Elementary education Administration | All | 15 |
| Summer | Teacher | Early Childhood Elementary education | 4 | 2 |
| Natalie | Teacher | Early Childhood | 1 | 2 |
| Ann | Teacher | Early Childhood | 3 | 24 |

Table 3.2: Teacher Profiles- Hodges Elementary

| <i>Name</i> | <i>Designation</i> | <i>Certification</i> | <i>Grades</i> | <i>Years of experience</i> |
|-------------|--|---|--------------------|----------------------------|
| Julie | Principal | Early Childhood Elementary Education Administration | All | 33 |
| Tracey | SAT chair | Special Education | All | 23 |
| Michelle | Special education teacher | Special Education | 4-5 | 19 |
| Grace | Teacher | Early Childhood National Board Certified | 1 | 7 |
| Sally | Teacher | Elementary Education Early Childhood | 2 | 4 |
| Tasha | Teacher | Early Childhood Reading and Literacy | 4 | 16 |
| Sandra | Teacher | Early Childhood National Board Certified | 3 | 8 |
| Anastasia | Interventionist | Teaching Assistant | K-3 | 7 |
| Mary | Interventionist Reading Specialist | Early Childhood Reading | K-4 | 18 |
| Jennifer | Interventionist Reading Specialist | Early Childhood Reading | 1-2 | 38 |
| Rita | Interventionist | Child Development Teaching Assistant | K-3 | 9 |
| Dorothy | Director of Student Services | School Psychology II | District office | 37 |

Data Collection Methods

Qualitative research requires robust data collection techniques and documentation of the research procedures (Bowen, 2009). Data collection methods included interviews (focus groups and individual), observations in the classroom and non-academic settings, and document collection (See Appendix D for data sources). In this study, I used a variety of techniques to collect data, which included field notes, audio recordings, video recording, memos, journals, and authentic documentations. I wrote field notes during interviews and observations. During the interviews the field notes were mainly to note words that stood out as important, responses that seemed vital, or responses that were for questions yet to come. I used a voice memo application on my phone to record observations within the school. It was efficient for me to walk around the school building and voice record what I observed. These observations of the setting included room arrangements and what were on the walls of the rooms I entered such as the gym, cafeteria, classroom, or main office. Once I got home, I made journal entries of my field experience. These included simple detail such as the weather, how I felt about the interviews, interruptions, and so on. I transcribed the voice memos from the observations and interviews, and sorted the information according to recurring themes. Transcription usually involves capturing verbal and non-verbal interactions that occur during an interview or observation, and turning them into written text. Transcription is the physical rewriting/typing of interviews, field notes, video, and audiotapes in order to facilitate grouping of similar information, ideas, or themes, using a well-developed transcription key (Merriam, 2002). For this study, interviews were the primary source of data

collection. Both individual and focus group interviews formed the bulk of the data analyzed in this study. The following section provides detailed explanation of each data collection method.

Individual interviews

Pepper and Wildly (2009) highlighted the importance of narratives in qualitative studies. They argued that interviews provide a face-to-face encounter used to obtain field texts. Interviews are the primary source for interpretive case studies. Interviews provide the best avenue to interpretations of a given phenomena from an individual's perspective (Walsham, 2002).

The interviews that I conducted provided rich detailed narratives of the teachers' experiences in the classroom while implementing RTI. Individual interviews with administrators and general education teachers were conducted. The interviews included a combination of standardized open-ended interviews, and closed fixed-response interviews.

An open-ended interview is one in which the interviewer asks single questions that can generate extended responses and the interview becomes more of a discussion of the interviewees' opinion (Patton, 2002). The open-ended interviews were used to get a general idea of teachers' and administrators' knowledge of RTI, their personal beliefs that influence how they implement RTI, and their perspective on the role of school culture. Closed-fixed interviews usually are scripted and involve responses to a set of questions (Patton, 2002). The interview is focused on the questions and deviations from

the questions are quite limited (Patton, 2002). Most of the questions that were scripted were tied to the research questions and aimed to answer these questions.

On the days of the interviews, I reported to the schools at around seven thirty in the morning. At Hodges, I conducted my interviews in a reading room. This room had the Reading First resources that had been used by teachers when the school implemented their reading programs. The room was spacious and had a table with several chairs around it. During the individual interviews, I sat across from the interviewees. I began each interview by informing the participants that I would be recording the interviews for the purpose of capturing the whole interview and later transcribing the interview for analysis. I used both audio and video recordings, and told the participants that I would be taking notes as the interviews progressed. I indicated that I would share the transcripts of the interviews with them. I also let them know that the information they shared would be made public first presented as my dissertation and published for other practitioners to also read about various perspectives of those implementing RTI. However, I assured each participant that his or her actual identity would not be disclosed.

From the scheduled interviews with general education teachers, I captured an in-depth discussion of their teaching philosophies, knowledge, beliefs, thoughts and attitudes about evidence-based programs in general and RTI specifically. When I interviewed general educators, I asked them about their knowledge of RTI, the programs they were implementing (Hazelkorn, 2011; Shwartz et al., 2009), modifications they made, if any, how they ensured fidelity (Burns, Appleton & Stehouwer, 2005), and their overall impressions and attitudes towards RTI. I then asked them what factors influenced

their instruction on a day-to-day basis. See Appendix E for individual interview prompts. The individual interviews were conducted at the school during the teachers' planning periods.

Pepper and Wildly (2009) emphasized that narratives, which are interpretations of interview data, permit life-like accounts that focus on experience and provide a framework and context for making meaning. These authors argued that constructing or crafting meaning required the recognition and selection of significant rather than trivial information. Through memos, I attempted to interpret individual stories while maintaining their authenticity as best as I could. At the end of each interview, I wrote down anything I thought was important. These memos included information such as whether the teacher felt at ease, if a question needed further clarification, or a response was irrelevant, any off topic information that seemed important, or simply something about my questioning technique that I felt I needed to change.

Interview protocol: All interviews were conducted during school hours during teachers planning periods. Each participant began by describing their areas of certification, years of teaching experience, and the grades they currently taught. After a brief introduction, we went straight into the interview questions. I avoided infringing on their instruction time by engaging in extensive small talk. The teachers were very friendly. I did not get the sense that any of them felt intimidated by the interview. Hodges is a school that has had visitors come in and out and many of their faculty are used to being asked questions about RTI.

Interviews at Barnes were conducted in a similar manner. It was done in a conference room that had a round table and I sat across from the participants. I used the same routine beginning of the interview, a brief introduction, and then moved on to the main interview. In both schools the same room was used for interviews.

Personal interviews lasted an average of 50 minutes each and the principals, with the help of the SAT chair, helped schedule times for each teacher. Each teacher was originally scheduled for a 45-60-minute interview. The lengths of the interviews varied because participants had either a lot to say or a little. Participants who had worked in the education system longer tended to have more to say than those who had worked for four years or less. I met with all the participants on scheduled days and the administrative team was able to schedule the follow-up focus group meetings.

Focus group interviews

A focus group is a technique involving the use of in-depth group interviews in which participants are selected because they are a purposeful, although not necessarily representative, sampling of a specific population (Thomas, MacMillan, McColl, Hale & Bond, 1995). The focus group interviews I conducted involved discussions about the school culture, knowledge of RTI, and policy issues.

Focus groups can provide information about a range of ideas and feelings that individuals have about certain issues, as well as illuminate the differences in perspective between groups of individuals (Thomas et al., 1995). I was looking for the range of ideas about knowledge of RTI. Using a focus group met this need because the participants were

able to discuss their individual understanding of RTI, which included varying perspectives of how it is being implemented at their school and how they think it should be implemented. Most of the group members agreed on many issues as far as implementation of RTI at their school.

The uniqueness of a focus group is its ability to generate data based on the synergy of the group. The members of the group should, therefore, feel comfortable with each other and engage in discussion. Krueger and Casey (2000) pointed out that for some individuals, self-disclosure is natural and comfortable, while for others it required trust and effort. It is for this reason that they recommend investing time and effort in selecting members of the group. Krueger (1994) believed rich data can only be generated if individuals in the group are prepared to engage fully in the discussion and, for this reason, advocated the use of a homogenous group. Based on the topic under investigation Krueger (1994) suggested that participants should share similar characteristics: gender group, age-range, ethnicity, and social class background. Most researchers, although they would not disagree with the concept of homogeneity, recommend that participants should not know each other, thus encouraging more honest and spontaneous expression of views and a wider range of responses (Krueger, 1994; Krueger and Casey 2000; Thomas et al., 1995).

However, in this study, the participants knew each other making it comfortable for them to share ideas in the discussion. They all worked at the same school and had formed professional bonds or relationships geared toward respect for individual opinions. This was evident by how they responded to each other's opinions and how they supported

what other members shared. Nevertheless, a few incidence of information withholding were noted especially, by the general education teachers who tended to want to be politically correct in the presence of their principal.

I conducted five focus group meetings. At Hodges I had three meetings while at Barnes I had two meetings. The first group meeting at Hodges had four participants, the principal, special education teacher, and two interventionists. The second meeting had two reading interventionists. The third meeting had the principal, the SAT chair, an interventionist and two general education teachers as participants. I conducted two group meetings at Barnes Elementary. The first meeting had the principal and the SAT chair as participants. The second meeting comprised of the assistant principal, an instructional coach and two general education teachers. Two focus groups were homogenous groups. One had two Tier I interventionists from Hodges Elementary. The other homogeneous group was at Barnes with two RTI administrators - the principal and SAT chair. Three of the focus groups were heterogeneous with professional diversity, hence richness, in the varied perspectives of RTI implementation. The criteria for forming the heterogeneous focus group were that it had to have an administrator, two general education teachers and an SAT chair. All participants in the focus groups participated in the initial individual interviews except for the assistant principal at Barnes who had to sit in for the principal. The principal was attending to other school district duties. The assistant principal had worked at this school longer than the principal and had also been the SAT co-chair at the school for more than five years. His contribution was deemed important.

Interview protocol: Scheduling of the focus group meetings was done during the individual meetings. All interviews, both individual and focus group, went as scheduled. The focus group meetings lasted between 75 minutes to 100 minutes. The meetings were initially scheduled for 60 to 90 minutes. Each meeting began with brief introductions. Again I informed the participants of the confidentiality of their identities. I informed the participants that there was no particular order that I expected them to respond and anyone could go first. In all the focus group interviews, all the participants responded to all of the questions. Some participants were prompted to provide their views. Some were more vocal than others, which is typical of focus group interviews. I expected the administrators to do most of the talking but it was the classroom teachers who did most of the talking. At Barnes Elementary for example, I had to prompt the assistant principal several times to give his opinion on some of the questions. While at Hodges, I also prompted the SAT chair to respond to some of the questions. When prompting I simply asked whether they had an opinion or anything to share and each time they provided a detailed response. See Appendix F for focus group protocols

Observations

I also observed two general education teachers as they implemented RTI in their classrooms. I conducted one observation in classrooms of the general education teachers participating in the research from each school. I focused on how they were implementing the core curriculum, whether they were giving instruction how they had indicated that they did. At Hodges Elementary, classrooms were set up in such a way that there were several sections in the classroom that students worked in small groups. During individual

interviews the teachers had been informed about my intended classroom observations. The classroom observations were not prescheduled, but the teachers knew to expect me. I walked to the classroom in which I intended to conduct the observation and asked the teacher if I could sit in class and observe. I was able to sit in the classroom, at a place that did not obstruct instruction and observe how instruction took place. I noted the technology used in the classroom, the instructional materials displayed, how the teacher conducted instruction and how students responded. After the observations, I talked with the teacher and asked about the curriculum she was using and the assessment used to monitor progress. The two teachers observed were Sandra a third grade teacher at Hodges and Summers a second grade teacher at Barnes. These teachers were selected because they were going to be in the focus group meetings as well. Both teachers were observed in the morning of the focus group interviews. See Appendix G for Classroom observation rubric.

Additional observations were conducted within the school, specifically in the hallways, and cafeteria. I did three school-wide observations at Hodges and two at Barnes. Observations were done in the morning and during lunchtime. These observations focused on how students and adults behaved, to capture the school culture. I also observed students moving from class to class. I documented the student work posted on teachers' walls and out in the hallway and included these in my document review. In addition to using classroom observations to corroborate information shared during the interviews, I used observations in the hallway to describe the culture of the school or the

first impression I got about the school. For example I observed a lot of student work displayed in the hallway.

Document review

Bowen (2009) described the importance of using document review and analysis as a research strategy. He described documents as including texts and images that had been recorded without the researcher's intervention. He emphasized the use of documents for triangulation, and listed several other uses of documents such as providing background information and historical insight, suggesting questions that needed clarification, providing a means to track changes, verify and corroborate evidence, and supplement research findings. I used document review to provide historical background. For example some documents such as Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) scores highlighted students' previous performance and compared it to current performance as evidence of student progress. I analyzed pre-referral documents to corroborate the referral process discussed during the interviews. The documents included the district-wide three-tiered academic process; the RTI fidelity procedure for Tier I and II; the Tier III SAT checklist for student service referral; interventions checklist for Hodges elementary; the Academic Intervention Monitoring System (AIMS: Elliott, DiPerna, & Shapiro, 2001); the Academic Competence Evaluation Scale (ACES: DiPerna & Elliott, 2000); and Annual Yearly Progress reports (AYP) for each school. I received the SAT checklist, AIMS and ACES documents, and professional documents from the district office. At the district office, I was also able to obtain a student's documents that included pre-referral procedures, interventions, assessments and recommendation for special education

services. The documents showed the referral process or RTI process for two students dating from September 2009 to April 2012. Hodges Elementary also provided two students' documentation for the RTI process. The student documentation had to meet the criteria of a student who had gone through the whole RTI process from the referral stage to identification for special education services. Many students can qualify for Tier I and Tier II interventions and the only comprehensive RTI process would be one that involved a student going through the whole process. The documents presented by the SAT chair and school psychologist at the district office met these criteria.

To corroborate evidence of professional development and teaching practices at the school I looked at professional development schedules on the website, student progress reports in observed classrooms, and student displayed work. I looked at student outcome data, professional development agendas, and professional development presentations as additional pieces to support implementation efforts already identified during interviews. Student outcome data consisted of universal screening scores and progress monitoring data, students' classroom grades and Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS) and Measure of Academic Progress (MAP) testing scores where applicable. Hodges used the DOMINEE screening tool. The participants from Barnes, on the other hand, did not provide evidence of a standardized screening tool. One of their participants indicated that she used a teacher-made assessment to determine the strengths and weaknesses of her students. In the referral documents for students going through the RTI process included their PASS and MAP scores. These two assessments were also used to monitor student progress in addition to assessments at the end of intervention periods. I

determined the existence and accessibility of authentic and useful documents at each site, to support my research findings. Appendix H is a summary of the documents used for document review.

In summary, I used various tools and data collection techniques such as audio and video recordings, field notes, journals and memos to document my findings. Audio and video recordings were used during interviews. These recordings were later transcribed verbatim and analyzed for recurring themes. Field notes were written and used to analyze participant reactions to questions, document participant body language, and gestures that may have had meaning beyond participant responses. Field notes were written documentation of my observations such as the physical environment, participants' reactions, interjections, and any relevant detail that may not be captured by an audio recording. These field notes help set the context for analyzing data. I also used journaling and memos to incorporate my reaction to participant responses for reflexivity purposes. Journaling involved written accounts of my experience in the field. They include the thought, feelings and reactions to situations in the field. Journal helped me reflect on the research process from their perspective including the successes and the shortcomings of the research process. Memo-ing, a process of constantly jotting down any and all information heard or observed that may be relevant to the research, plays a crucial role throughout the analysis process (Hess-Biber & Leavy 2004). These memos were written or recorded accounts of events and observations that were noted down as important to the research that needed to be address. Some were reminders for what needed to be included in the research or require further attention. For the focus groups, I also used video

recording so that I would be able to review participant responses and participant reactions to other's responses.

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is the process of systematically going through and organizing one's data to enable you to come up with common themes (Glesne, 2000). It involves working with data, sorting them, breaking them up into manageable units, coding them, searching for patterns and synthesizing them so that you can make sense of what you have learned. Analyzing text involves discovering themes and subthemes, winnowing themes, building hierarchies of themes and codes, and linking themes to theoretical models (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Data analysis and data interpretations are interrelated. As one analyzes data, one interprets data (See Appendix I for data collection and analysis).

Data was analyzed in a cyclical manner so that while new data was analyzed, old data was analyzed as well to reveal any patterns. Data analysis involved transcription, coding, theme development and thematic analysis, grouping of data based on similarities, simply arranging the data while looking for patterns. Coding is a progressive process of sorting and defining, and defining and sorting your data. Coding makes it easier to group or sort information gathered into categories and eventually into thematic units. Coding involved identification of preliminary codes then developing a codebook that described each code. Appendix J shows the preliminary codes that were developed from the data.

Open coding was used which involved the breaking down, examining, conceptualizing and categorizing of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data were fractured, then similar concepts or ideas were grouped into identifiable categories based on information from the literature. The coding process involved a line-by-line documentation of identifiable relevant data from transcriptions of interviews and observations, and a review of authentic documents from the sites. The importance of a concept was noted by the frequency of its occurrence.

After the initial open coding, axial coding was used. Axial coding recombines the initial data through connections between categories that result in more complex subcategories. Axial coding consists of linking subcategories to other categories in a relational manner denoting causal conditions, phenomenon, context, intervening conditions, interactions strategies, and consequences (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the *causal condition*, the events leading to the implementation of RTI were analyzed. The *phenomenon* under investigation was implementation of RTI. The *context* in this case was the condition under which RTI occurred. Here a detailed analysis of the schools' models was done especially as was perceived by the practitioners implementing RTI. The intervening conditions such as school culture, teacher belief and program knowledge formed an integral part of analyzing influences of the phenomenon. The participants' *interaction, action* and *reaction* in response to RTI were also noted in a bid to explain their overall understanding of RTI and their positive or negative reaction to the implementation of this service delivery model. Finally, *consequences* of the interactions

were noted as participants responded to questions about classroom implementation of RTI. Appendix K is a list of the subcategories formed from the axial coding.

The subcategories identified from the axial coding method were combined with the open coding categories to develop overarching themes. This additional method of analysis involved the use of selective coding. Selective coding is the process of integrating concepts into theories. Open coding was used to identify important frequently occurring ideas and concepts that answered the overarching question about the role of school culture, teacher belief and program knowledge on the implementation of RTI. Axial coding on the other hand involved a second look at the data this time with the cultural, conflict and structural theory in mind as well as the important factors identified from the literature as impacting the implementation of comprehensive school-wide reforms. The steps involved identifying core categories, relating minor categories to core categories constantly referring to the literature, justifying the relationships between the categories merged, refining categories, and finally developing a hypothesis based on the recurring concepts so as to formulate themes. Appendix L shows the next set of categories developed from the two coding strategies.

Finally, a thematic analysis approach (Hess-Biber & Leavy, 2004) was utilized to infuse both coding methods to establish underlying themes. A thematic approach is a process of recoding and then segregating the data into data clusters for further analysis and description based on identified themes. Using this approach, I interpreted the data, tying my findings to current literature and my conceptual framework. In addition, for my narrative analysis, I used narrative codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). I used memos and

journals (in my notebook) to document important and relevant observations or quotes. The narrative analysis helped in the selection of the personal experiences of teachers and administrators, and helped capture and share their individual process of implementing RTI. Appendix M shows how the open and axial coding strategies were used to come up with central themes.

Some of the most obvious themes in a corpus of data are those “topics that occur and reoccur” (Bogdan & Taylor 1975, p. 83) or are “recurring regularities” (Guba 1978, p.53). According to Ryan and Bernard (2003) themes come both from the data (an inductive approach) and from the investigator’s prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study (an a priori approach). A priori themes come from the characteristics of the phenomenon being studied; from already agreed on professional definitions found in literature reviews; from local, commonsense constructs; and from researchers’ values, theoretical orientations, and personal experiences (Bulmer 1979; Maxwell 1996; Strauss 1987). Strauss and Corbin (1990) called this theoretical sensitivity.

I used *posteriori-coding* strategies analyzing themes as I encountered them during data analysis. The posteriori method is modeled after grounded theory approach in which codes are not predetermined but generated through emerging themes (Hess-Biber & Leavy 2004). However, the literature suggests areas to look for especially when observing the implementation of RTI. These areas include the fundamental features of RTI, including the use of a screening tool, evidence of progress monitoring, use of data to drive instruction and how the multidisciplinary team determines students’ movement

through the different Tiers. This lead to an *apriori* approach to data analysis especially, for observational data.

I used memos and journals to reflect on the information gathered from the field. These included descriptions of the school environment, interactions with other faculty and staff at the school, my first impressions of the school, classrooms, and other buildings. I also used journaling to reflect on the research process from a researcher's standpoint. These included my personal misconceptions about schools and participants, reflecting on the literature and how it influenced my interview process or reaction to responses, my initial biases, surprises and my reaction to actual findings. I used journaling to record researcher reflexivity- subjectivity and positionality.

Ethical Issues

When writing about individual personal experiences, researchers run the risk of participants not opening up to them because of fear of later being identified as the one who made certain comments. I did my best to ensure my participants' identities remained confidential. I let them know that neither the schools' names nor the participants' names would be divulged. I ensured all my data was stored on a secure site, which was my amazon cloud and the printed transcripts in a locked cabinet (See Appendix A for confidentiality agreement).

Furthermore, before I began my research, I ensured that I followed proper procedures required by the school district for getting approval to conduct a study. I began by getting in touch with the district's director of student services. Individuals from the

state department recommended this school district. The state department's RTI coordinator specifically recommended that I get in touch with the director of student services. Dorothy, the director, requested for additional documentation that detailed the methods of data collection, the number of participants required, and how I would ensure confidentiality. All these documents were given to the superintendent who then gave her approval for the study to be conducted.

The director and I then contacted the principals from each school to select participants and schedule interviews. Details of this process had been discussed previously. I obtained signed consent letters from my participants (See Appendix B for the invitation letter). In my letters, I included the purpose of the research and how I intended to share my findings. I also shared the importance of conducting this research, including how it would be beneficial to the participants and other teachers and administrators. In negotiating permission to conduct this study, I made the terms of the agreement and my intent clear to both the district officials and participants.

I informed the participants that the information they shared would not pose a threat or a risk to them. I used pseudonyms to protect the participants' identity so that the information that I collected does not embarrass or in any way harm them. I treated participants with respect and sought cooperation with them throughout the research process. I always let my participants know what was expected of them and what they could expect of me during this study. I did my best to report my findings as accurately as I could. My dissertation advisor was my confidante when it came to issues that seemed of ethical concern.

This research will benefit general education teachers and school administrators because through the lived experience of individuals similar to them, they will be able to see ways others have attempted to cope with or eliminate the challenges of implementing RTI. I informed the participants of the benefits of sharing their experiences. Knowing about others' experiences can help us shape our own practice or even help us cope when faced with difficult situations. Furthermore, such knowledge can also help policy makers with implementation strategies that are more likely to be effective.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

Lather (1986) argues that it is essential to develop data credibility checks to protect our research and theory construction from our enthusiasm. In this way we protect our research from our own biases and the ways those biases may distort the logic of evidence within openly ideological research.

Maxwell (1996) defines validity as the correctness or credibility of a description, an account, an explanation, an interpretation or a conclusion. To check for validity threats I used various strategies to monitor subjectivity, trustworthiness, and rigor of my data. Lincoln and Guba (1985), describe the importance of ensuring trustworthiness (credibility or internal validity). Triangulation was my first step in ensuring that my subjectivity was put in check. Triangulation sheds light upon common themes found in different sources (Creswell, 1998) and strengthens dependability and credibility (Merriam, 1998). Using different data collection methods such as journals, interviews, documents and observations helped me accurately portray information from the field

devoid of any biases. Through triangulation of data I strengthened the credibility of the data. I used an advocate who helped me gain access and build rapport with my participants so that I could get as much information as I could without any vital information being censored. My advocate was the special education director who initiated talks with building principals and helped me gain access to participants for my study. I was in the field for three months.

Lather (1986) provided guidelines for researchers to follow in order to address potential threats based on description, theory, interpretation, and possible researcher bias. For this research I used these guidelines to check for various threats to the credibility of my research. To strengthen face validity and prevent interpretive threats I built in participants' review of interview transcripts so as not to impose my own framework or meaning. I incorporated participant review of transcripts by feeding back my interpretations and analysis to participants for clarification.

In order to strengthen construct validity and minimize theoretical threats, I reviewed raw data, limiting attention to discrepant data so that only reoccurring themes and codes were used for data analysis. Data interpretation and any outliers were eliminated with documented justifications. I tried my best not to have alternative explanations to my findings. In other words, I avoided superimposing theories on participant responses by allowing their experience to speak for themselves (Lather, 1986). Furthermore, in order to reduce researcher bias I provided a detailed explanation of my positionality and subjectivity in the next section. I did this through reflexive subjectivity (Lather, 1986) and continuously stating my interpretations of participant

stories that may be influenced by the literature I reviewed, the theories that come into play, or my personal beliefs and experiences. This process allows the reader to see my involvement in the research process. This helps the readers determine, on their own, the validity of the research. While analyzing the data, I emphasized or put at the forefront previous research findings and participant narratives to guide my interpretation of observational data.

In qualitative research, the terms transferability, dependability, and confirmability are used in place of the terms external validity, reliability and objectivity used in quantitative research. For transferability I included thick, rich descriptions and raw data, giving as much detail from the interviews as necessary. This will provide the readers with opportunities to interpret the findings as best as they can without limiting them to researcher interpretations. To account for dependability I maintained an organized audit trail of my data that was safely stored under lock and key. I also used a multi-site design whereby I had at least two sites to conduct my research.

Furthermore, for confirmability I included direct quotes (raw data) and provided a detailed explanation for any data reduction and analysis products and justified the need for their use. Miles and Hubberman (1994), state that it is important to check the meaning of outliers, follow up surprises, and rule out spurious relations. An outlier or response that is quite different from others may subject the readers to developing alternative interpretations of the data. A detailed explanation for the reason for these occurrences is necessary. Any information that was deemed an outlier was documented as unusual responses and its use or omission from the identified themes was explained.

Positionality

There is a growing body of literature around issues of positionality, power, knowledge construction and representation in qualitative research (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Yeh Lee, Kee, Ntsaene & Muhamad, 2001). Critical and feminist theory, postmodernism, multiculturalism, and participatory and action research are now shaping our understanding of researcher interpretation by explaining the insider/outsider status in terms of one's positionality vis-a-vis race, class, gender, culture and other factors, while presenting us better tools for understanding the dynamics of researching within and across one's culture (Merriam, et. al., 2001).

I am a Black female who moved to the United States from Kenya. My race and ethnicity was quite different from those of my participants. I found teachers from different ethnic backgrounds and this made the interview process quite informative. Even though my initial expectations were that the differences might put me at a slight disadvantage or advantage depending on each individual, I did not realize either. I did not have an existing relationship with any of my participants therefore I did not influence their responses in any way. Once the criteria for participants was made known to administrators, the administrators consulted with faculty members and the participants volunteered to be in the study.

I did not expect to hold power over my participants. Power in this situation may be described as feeling a sense of superiority based on one's knowledge, age, gender or position of leadership (Merriam, et. al. 2001). I explained to my participants that I was

also a classroom teacher having a South Carolina certification in general education as well as special education. The participants were mainly Caucasian female teachers. Being a Black female teacher, I saw myself positioned both as an insider and an outsider. As an insider, some of the key characteristics that I shared with my participants included being female, and a general education teacher. I believe it was easier to build rapport with my participants because they saw me as one of them- a teacher in the public school system. They felt free to share their experiences because they identified with the fact that I had also been a teacher. There were two male teachers who participated in the study. One was an assistant principal and the other was a classroom teacher. The assistant principal stepped in when the principal was unavailable to be in the focus group.

Nevertheless, other factors positioned me as an outsider. My race and my role as a researcher and Ph.D. candidate may have been to my disadvantage. It was not possible to tell whether the participants felt the need to withhold vital information when they knew it was for research purposes and publication. I did notice however, that some of the participants constantly wanted affirmation that they answered the questions correctly. I reassured them that I was mainly interested in their perspective on RTI implementation at their school and any response was neither right nor wrong. However, I did state explicitly my methods of ensuring confidentiality to get vital personal experiences, thoughts and feelings so that the participants would not worry about their supervisors checking up on what they said during the interviews.

In reviewing some of my journal entries, I did notice that I documented some questions as redirected more often than others. Questions about school culture, for

example, were constantly probed for additional information and in some cases participants asked for a definition of school culture. A few other questions may have needed follow up questions but not from every participant.

Furthermore, to make the researcher's work credible, information has to be confirmed by two independent sources of data collection. This is typically done through triangulation, using multiple research techniques, member checking, and qualitative variations of reliability coding. This research focused on the perspectives of stakeholders implementing RTI and hence there was a need for a second opinion for the interpretations. This was done through feeding back my interview to the participants for authenticity of interpretation. The participants all received verbatim transcripts of the interviews. No participant reported any discrepancy with the information collected and none indicated that they needed to clarify or add information.

Finally, I propose that the research design I selected, including the sampling techniques, data gathering and data analysis methods, was the most appropriate for this study. Using this design, I was able to answer my research questions, share the experiences of practitioners in the field, and contribute to the vast literature of this transformational educational reform, response to intervention.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Chapter four is a presentation of the findings of the study on the roles of school culture, teacher beliefs and program knowledge on the implementation of RTI as perceived by general education teachers and administrators in two schools in South Carolina (SC). The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' and administrators' perceptions of RTI, especially as it was implemented in their schools, and to describe their experiences inside and outside the classroom as they implemented this school-wide initiative. Furthermore, issues about the role of school culture, teacher beliefs and knowledge of RTI as viewed by practitioners are presented in this chapter.

The overarching question that drove this study was to investigate how school culture, personal beliefs, and knowledge of RTI may have affected the implementation of RTI in specific schools. This chapter will include participants' responses and perceptions on these questions including personal experiences about how they implement RTI in their classrooms. However, it is important to begin with a description of the RTI model at this district including the district's goal for implementing RTI to provide a context for understanding the findings.

The RTI Vision for The District

In understanding the implementation of RTI in these schools, it is important to review the vision the district had for the implementation of this school-wide initiative. In an interview with the director of student services, Dorothy, she stated that the main goal for implementing RTI was to meet the needs of the struggling learners. Dorothy was a school psychologist and she had been the director of the Department of Student Service at this district for 13 years. She had worked in education for 36 years as a school psychologist, a lead psychologist and now as a director. She had worked at this school district for 20 years. She indicated that by using the Reading First federal funding, many schools had undergone rigorous professional development and adopted this reading initiative. Therefore, it was much easier for schools in this district to implement RTI having received training in the implementation of this reading initiative. Many of the RTI features or components were already in place when the district fully adopted the RTI model.

Furthermore, the director of student services, who spearheaded this initiative, said she supported the implementation of RTI because it proved an effective instructional model for all students. She said that even though her department developed the model and helped implement RTI in schools, they left the lead role to principals. She said this was essentially a general education initiative and she wanted it to remain that way. Dorothy stated with emphasis that her intention was to let RTI be a general education initiative and to simply have the special education department act as support. However, she stated that she worked with other district officials to collaborate on ways that her

department would be involved even indirectly. For example, the special education department had some of their teachers providing Tier II interventions for students not already identified for special education services. Though the special education teachers still served a majority of students identified as having learning disabilities, a third of their time would still be used to assist students needing intervention who had not been identified.

Furthermore, these special education teachers used some of the programs that they used with students identified with learning disabilities. Any and all struggling learners would use the interventions purchased by the office of student services without necessarily having been identified first. The director of student services also shared how they shared Title I federal funding to purchase intervention programs for students in Tier II of RTI and to pay personnel to provide Tier II interventions.

Description of RTI Model at this District

Latter School District has implemented RTI for approximately 10 years. The office of student services developed the RTI service delivery model that used both the standard treatment protocol and the problem-solving models. Below is a description of their RTI model as elaborated in the district manual.

Tier I is called “Instruction for all students” according to the school manual. It consists of the provision of the general education curriculum or program adopted by the school district to all students in the regular classroom setting. Teachers implement research supported differentiated instruction with fidelity. Universal screening of

academic skills is conducted, and academic progress is regularly monitored. Each student is given the opportunity to learn in a preventative and proactive setting. According to the manual, school administrators and instructional facilitators utilize structured teacher conference to ensure Tier I universal instruction is implemented with fidelity. See Appendix N for RTI fidelity procedures for Tier I.

Tier II is small-group instruction/intervention that uses the standard treatment protocol instructional strategy approved by the school. These small-group interventions supplement the general education curriculum. At this level, teachers supplement research-based small-group interventions with high efficiency and rapid response, often with the collaboration of support staff. Interventions are generally more systematic and teacher-directed with frequent progress monitoring. Again administrators and instructional facilitators use teacher conferences to ensure intervention is implemented with fidelity. See Appendix O for RTI fidelity procedures for Tier II.

Tier III requires a referral to the general education Student Assistance Team (SAT). This Tier uses a problem-solving process to develop intensive and explicit interventions or alternative instructional programs for specific students. The teacher, often in collaboration with support staff, implemented high intensity interventions with frequent progress monitoring documented with a chart or graph.

The computer-based programs they initially used were ACES (DiPerna & Elliott, 2000) and AIMS (Elliot, DiPerna & Shapiro, 2001). These are psychometric instruments that are used to assess academic functioning of students from grades K-12 (Elliot,

DiPerna & Shapiro, 2001). They provide integrated assessment for intervention system that uses teacher and self-report rating, which combine norm referenced (ACES) and criterion referenced (AIMS) to facilitate the problem solving process (DiPerna & Elliott, 2000; Elliot, DiPerna & Shapiro, 2001). They are also tools used for planning and evaluating classroom based interventions for students experiencing academic difficulties. The academic competencies evaluated using these tools include study skills, interpersonal skills, motivation, engagement, and academic skills such as reading, mathematics, and critical thinking. The documents analyzed used these instruments to assess and rate student competencies.

The school district recently adopted Enrich and had several professional development sessions to support its implementation in schools. Enrich is a computer-based program similar to ACES and AIMS but it goes beyond assessment and progress monitoring and tracks every meeting including team decision-making. Results of additional evaluations by school psychologists, speech therapists, and occupational therapists are also documented in Enrich. If a disability was suspected, a referral was initiated in Enrich to begin the evaluation process to determine if the student met special education or 504 eligibilities. All evaluation requests began with a referral to SAT. See Appendix P for SAT checklist for student referral. According to the director of student services, this computer based management system had proven more efficient than any other system they had previously used. She said their district had a well-developed RTI model in place and it was easier to upload their design into this computer system. She said many other commercial data-management systems came with predesigned RTI

models and school districts had to choose a design that best suited them. Enrich was typically blank and school districts that had built an RTI model could easily incorporate their model and information into this data-management system.

Observations of the Schools

The two schools that participated in this study were Barnes elementary and Hodges elementary. Based on a detailed observation of these schools, they were seen to have differences in the demographics of the students and seemed to be culturally different. Barnes was in a neighborhood that appeared relatively unsafe. The entrance to the building was locked and any visitor to the school had to buzz for the door to be open. The school was surrounded by many trailer homes many of which looked abandoned. As indicated, the tight security may have suggested an unsafe neighborhood and for the safety of the children, the main entrance needed to be locked. Barnes served a larger population of low-income families and a larger population of immigrant families than Hodges Elementary. They constantly had students transferring in and out of the school. The principal indicated that getting parental involvement was a challenge because many of the parents were either intimidated by school or never had a positive experience in school. Nevertheless, the school tried to involve parents as much as possible through an after school, adult, English as a Second Language program and providing students with physical needs such as books and clothing.

On the other hand, Hodges elementary did not have a locked entrance to the school. It was located off of a major highway with the road leading past the school

ending in a dead end street. It had a smaller immigrant population. Hodges had a much higher teacher and student retention rate than Barnes.

Culturally, the two schools seemed different. For example, Hodges seemed to have a more stable culture especially because their principal had been at this school for about 11 years. She had set the tone for expectations at the school and the faculty seemed to know what was expected of them. When teachers from Hodges were asked about their classroom instruction and practices, they mentioned similar classroom setups and structures. The teachers were implementing the same management system known as the Daily Five where students were given a few minutes of whole group instruction and then moved into five small-group rotations. The principal at Hodges also indicated that she had been at this school since the implementation of RTI and was able to explain how they had been implementing RTI for the past 10 years including many of the professional development sessions that had been provided to her faculty and staff. She gladly displayed some of the books they had received during their training, many of which were on the implementation of RTI. The school also had a resource room full of Reading First materials and resources. However, these resources did not seem to be in use anymore. They were in storage containers piles high and some were at the very top of the built-in shelves. The principal, Julie, also indicated during her interview that they had not been using the Reading First material. Nevertheless, the participants at Hodges seemed to confidently describe RTI implementation at their school including the referral process, their roles, and roles of other team members.

Barnes, in contrast, had a new principal. This was her second year at the school. However, she was not new to the district having worked in various capacities as a teacher and assistant principal before this position. She seemed to be aware of the basic tenets of RTI and how it was expected to be implemented district-wide. It was not surprising when the participants from this school showed variations in classroom structures. The most notable variation was in universal screening where one participant indicated that she used a teacher-made tool to assess where the students were academically. When implementing RTI, it is important to use an effective tool for universal screening preferably a curriculum-based assessment that has been tested for effective screening of academic skills.

Variations were also noted in how these two schools described school culture, though this was mainly because of the participants interpretation of what school culture was. The cultural differences may also be attributed to the duration of leadership, though not necessarily leadership styles because the administrators both seemed to exhibit similar styles. Both seemed to have developed a good rapport with their faculty and their faculty seemed comfortable around them.

Reasons for Implementing RTI at each School

The intent of RTI is to identify children who are not progressing in the general education curriculum and, in response, provide more intense, individualized intervention that targets regular curricular goals (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton 2004; Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; Justice, 2006). The National Center on Response to

Intervention (NCRTI) uses the following definition of RTI based on available research and evidence-based practice:

Response to intervention integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level prevention system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavior problems. With RTI, schools identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions depending on a student's responsiveness, and identify students with learning disabilities (NCRTI, 2010, p.2).

In talking with both principals at the schools, their reasons for implementing RTI seemed to be in line with the above sentiments. Gloria, the principal at Barnes Elementary, stated that their main goal was to meet the needs of the children "...and then of course, going right along with that is to keep from misidentifying or over-identifying children with special needs." She felt that though RTI allowed teachers to be the best that they could be because it helped them to identify the areas in which the children needed assistance, it also helped them to differentiate instruction. "...and it's what we do best, but it's a process, where we can, also, prevent kids from going into the special education program" said Gloria.

She saw the targeting of struggling students for more intensive intervention as preventing them from going into special education. She further reiterated this saying,

I mean, you know, I truly believe that kids are probably over-identified, and we can prevent a lot of that by meeting them where they are and honing in on what the real issues are that they are struggling with and be able to meet their needs there.

Similarly, Julie the principal of Hodges Elementary supported this stating that RTI was just providing children what they needed on their level and making sure that teachers assessed student progress. She said,

It kind of looks like the teacher gives assessments such as the DOMINEE, or whatever the math assessment... whatever we use we have several measures to assess children, and the teachers determine who needs, substantial intervention and they are meeting with those students almost every day because they have to move them...they are two or three grade levels below. And they might just need additional intervention... and they [teachers] will meet with those a couple of times a week and the students that are on grade level they may not even meet with them that week.

Several practitioners supported their principal's RTI goals and saw the implementation of RTI as teachers trying to meet each student's instructional needs. John, a second grade teacher at Barnes Elementary was able to share his take on the implementation of RTI. He said it was being able to assess students at whatever level they were and designing instruction to meet those specific students' needs. He further stated that it also meant "...giving reassessments to see if your instruction was working

and if you needed to adjust it or modify it... and hopefully, meet students' needs at their levels, since we have lots of different children at lots of different levels. So, I guess, it's that multi-level instruction where you really are individualizing instruction for each student.”

The meeting of students' needs seemed to be the overarching goal for implementation of RTI at each school. This is in line with the overarching goal of RTI, which is to provide students with evidence-based instruction, and provide remediation as early as possible to students who have demonstrated an inability to respond to your instruction. With several people on board with the goal for implementing RTI, it seemed that implementation efforts should have been smooth and simple. Nevertheless, there were several other factors that impacted implementation efforts.

The next section is devoted to describing some of the themes developed from what practitioners presented as issues they considered important for the implementation of RTI. The themes were identified based on interpretations of participants' perspectives of the RTI implementation at their schools. This will be followed by a summary of how the participant responses addressed each of the research questions.

Emerging Themes

A total of 20 practitioners participated in this study. Each participant shared what they perceived as the reasons for RTI implementation, how they viewed implementation efforts and what their roles were when implementing RTI. They each gave in-depth reflections on their take on RTI including personal experiences with the implementation

of this system-wide delivery model. Similarities were noted between responses and formed the basis of the development of themes. Individual uniqueness was also captured and presented with each theme. Despite the differences between schools and between individual participants, common themes were identified within the individual and focus group interviews based on what participants perceived as being central to the implementation of RTI in their schools.

Collaboration, teamwork, and networking

Many practitioners indicated that collaboration and teamwork were integral parts of the RTI process. The consensus was that collaboration and working as members of a team put everyone on the same page as far as meeting the needs of each individual child, especially struggling students.

Grace, a second grade teacher at Hodges Elementary, thought the most unique thing was that they all felt like a family. She talked about having a diverse group of individuals, both teachers and students at the school, but they seemed to work as a single unit. She described the students in her classroom when asked to describe the school culture “...we’ve got some different cultures like in my classroom I have Mexican American. I have some Cuban American and then we have the White and the African American of course, and we just all blend and nobody notices that anybody is any different.” To her, blending-in as opposed to standing-out was an important factor to showing how the school collaborated despite differences.

Summer, a second year teacher at Barnes Elementary, emphasized the need to have an ‘open door policy’ as important in the implementation of RTI. She said that this was important because sometimes she questioned if the students she had were really struggling and she thought being able to talk to someone was important in her decision-making process. She said, “...and with that, I’m able to talk to her [Louise] and get ideas for how to help them [students] in class... with those interventions if I was going through the process... but also just being able to ask questions, I think it’s major having people to go to... so very open.”

Mary, one of the four interventionists at Hodges Elementary, indicated how other coworkers had been very helpful to her “So, it’s been really good for me... you can, kind of work with your co-workers to say what, you know. [Especially] if they are having any other ideas that might help, [or] if you are struggling with a student...” Mary is a reading specialist and she works with kindergarten and first grade students who struggle with reading.

Susan, the math instructional coach at Barnes Elementary, said she thought that the culture as far as their teachers was very good. The teachers came together on grade level meetings and worked together, planning most of the time, especially the different activities such as lessons that they presented to their students.

Usually, there was a lot of information teachers could gather from the previous teachers the child had and get a really clear picture and a lot more understanding about the needs of that child, or the challenges that child faced. In John’s view this was

important in meeting the needs of the child. He said that having some kind of communication like they did with a team kind of helped them go in the right direction and make sure they were being effective teachers "...where it's not just, you know, throwing stuff on the wall to see if it works... know what sticks...what works. But it's more of a scientific part to meeting a child's needs." John indicated that before RTI was developed, many teachers were on their own or they might have received some advice or some assistance. However, it had taken knowing their students and trying to assess their needs and meet those needs in a more of a scientific approach for the students to be successful "... okay this didn't work. What else can I do?" reiterated John.

Susan also emphasized the fact that collaboration helped with bouncing ideas so that when one wanted to try out something new they sought team approval before implementation. The team itself could also come up with additional ideas so that teachers did not have to try too many things on their own. Making that decision as a team after brainstorming options made the team accountable for the student's success as opposed to an individual calling all the shots, some of which might not work. Tier II used the standard treatment protocol with a list of interventions that could be provided to the student and it took a team effort to decide which intervention best suited the child. "...and the team work is the most important thing. Everybody has to have that same mindset for it to really work" Michelle, a special education teacher at Hodges, emphasized.

Michelle further elaborated,

And one thing I have to say, too, that's true here and I can't attest, like I said I can't attest for every other school... that this school is full of support and whenever you do have a problem with something or something that you can't figure out, there is plenty of people to bounce ideas off of. You know, Julie has an open door policy. We can walk into her office and say, "Okay I pulled my last hair out. I don't know what else to do. Give me some more ideas." You know, Ms. Louise is the same way as the assistant principal. [She] is the same way... anybody you can walk in any class room and say, okay I have done this and this, give me some more ideas. What can I do next? I have never been in a school that was like that until I came here. And it don't matter what grade level... you can be working with a fifth grade student and say okay they are not doing it at fifth grade level and I have tried this... to scaffold so at third grade what would you do? And tell me how to get there. What am I missing? What part did I leave out? I just think that's so important because everybody has that open door policy that we can go and ask questions and, you know, nobody is afraid to share their knowledge or give up their special thing that they do.

Michelle also thought that having such an open door policy was good for the parents - knowing they could access anyone in the school at any time. Parental involvement in the RTI process is vital. Parents play such an integral part in the process, having to attend meetings and being part of the team that get to make decisions about the academic progress of their children. Michelle said, "... it makes a huge, huge difference to know that there is an open door policy of us being able to go to the parents whenever

we need something and for them to come to us when they need something.” She stated that parents had her cell phone and could call her at anytime. “It is just a typical thing to call and say, ‘hey, you know this happened with little Suzy today and I just felt like you needed to know because maybe tomorrow we need to do this’...

This collaboration went beyond working with faculty and staff at the school. One participant mentioned how she had developed connections with other teachers she had met during professional development outside the district. Sandra, a third grade teacher at Hodges, explained how she met a teacher from Columbia, South Carolina at a national conference who was attending a Daily Five presentation and was not really sure how using Daily Five would benefit her students. Sandra encouraged her and kept in touch with her helping her through the process of setting up the use of this classroom management strategy within her school.

And to share ideas with her, I mean like, we shared things like even our field trip, like we go on a three day over night field trip to Charleston and do a South Carolina history field trip and she was like, I need to know more about that. So we’ve communicated back and forth, we’ve talked on the phone and we’ve emailed and she’s trying to figure out a way that her class can go with us and join us in Charleston to do what we are doing, so to collaborate with other people, other teachers is important to us.

In an RTI model, Tier I instruction consists of high-quality evidence-based classroom instruction (Coleman, Buysse, & Neitzel, 2006). Classroom teachers are

expected to engage children in a facilitative manner, encouraging verbal interaction and active involvement in literacy, math, and other curricula activities (Bredekamp, 1987; Bryant, Burchinal, Lau, & Sparling, 1994; Howes & Olenick, 1986). One of the dual purposes of RTI is to remediate skills and ensure that students can be successful in Tier I classroom, hence effective Tier II interventions should be instructionally aligned with the general education curriculum to permit fluid student reintegration into Tier I (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012). In reading for example, the district used Hundred Book Challenge as their core curriculum. This curriculum was used in grades one through four. Supplemental interventions included the use of Reading Recovery for the lower grades and Reading Counts for the higher grades. Both were interventions that would be used in the classroom or with an interventionist outside of the core curriculum. The general education teacher and an interventionist would work on the same intervention ensuring the student was successful in meeting grade level standards.

Developing such a culture of teamwork and collaboration within the school and that also extends beyond the schools into networking with other educators is important. Such sharing of ideas can inform educators about RTI implementation strategies in other schools and can help in developing strategies to improve implementation efforts in their own school. If something has been tried out at another school and failed, then the leadership team at one school can opt out of wasting time and resources on a failed strategy. Hence, it is only important to actively support initiatives that have proven successful.

Julie further described how other schools within the district wanted to implement RTI because they had seen how well students progressed at Hodges Elementary. When other principals asked her how they could be like their school, she simply said, “Well you start with the teacher, all of this [pointing at books], these books that reach the heart and the mind” She believed that one had to reach the teachers first. To her, funding was not the main concern but getting the teachers to buy in to whatever was being implemented was essential.

Because you had to get the teacher to believe that ‘I can do it, no matter if I have any money or not’. A teacher has to believe in it and teachers just don’t automatically believe in things like that. They don’t come out of college believing that, especially when we went through our \$100,000 a year or whatever, that money made a difference and it doesn’t. It’s all about the teachers. And so, those are the areas we went through first. After we believed that we had the most impact, then how can I do it? So then we went through all these other [trainings] So, I know that from a principal viewpoint to another principal that’s the way we started.

Though Julie did not cite funding as the most important item in effective implementation of RTI, she did state that there was a place to consider funding, especially when properly planning for areas that need funding and how to use the money provided wisely. Julie stated,

When I realized that resources were going to be coming through... down from the Federal Government through Title I and Dorothy's office, Special Needs, I wanted to get to them and say to them "I know you're going to be getting a bunch of money and I can give you an idea of where to spend it". I just kind of watched that... before they even knew they were getting it. So, it helped to have a plan when they finally got it. I included my school and asked how to be an RTI school and we did our Hundred Book Challenge. I said they need it too, because this is RTI and they need it too (See Appendix Q for the different curricula and programs at these schools).

Sandra also added that they have had a lot of schools in their district, and also statewide, visit their school since they had developed RTI, "...and since our philosophies have changed. I mean, I know a few years ago they were like 25 teachers on the state level that came in just to look at the model and I think that is one way to just like just give people a glance of what you are talking about." This type of networking not only makes your school a better school because you have to set the example for other schools to follow, but it helps other schools who are at the beginning stages of RTI and are looking for a model from which to follow.

As Julie put it, "So, just connecting with the schools, kind of starting, having some commonalities... resources eventually become valuable too... and they now will benefit from that [collaboration]."

Collaboration, teamwork, and networking stood out as essential cultural norms in both elementary schools. Such cultural norms would greatly support the RTI initiative, which is predominantly based on collaborative efforts of the multidisciplinary team. The participants at Barnes, however, did not describe their school as a model school. None of the participants talked about having outside observers or even other schools from the district. When analyzing both schools AYP school report, according to the reports, Hodges Elementary had progressed from being an At Risk school in 2008 to an Average school between 2009 and 2012, while Barnes had consistently performed at Below Average between 2008 and 2012. This may have been the reason for the change in principal. The overall district report card rating had been average and for the first time was excellent in 2012. It is also important to note that two of the participants from Barnes were in their second year of teaching while the participant from Hodges who had the least number of years at the school had worked there for seven years. Nevertheless, participants from both schools cited collaboration and teamwork as central to their daily operations.

Leadership and active support systems

For any program to set sail it is important for there to be support systems in place. Implementation efforts often fade after a while especially when there is no one to see them through. This theme differed from collaboration and teamwork because it focuses on the leadership team and what they do to provide financial support, training, and/or information vital for RTI implementation. Many of the general education teachers lauded their administrators as providing necessary support systems for them to be able to

implement RTI. Support in this case is viewed differently from collaboration because it refers to tangible resources, acknowledgement, and allowance by the administrators for faculty and staff to employ whatever means to ensure student success. The administrators interviewed also reiterated the importance of them providing the needed support for the effective implementation of RTI. In turn, these administrators also shared their gratitude for the school district support during the implementation of RTI.

Gloria stated that, especially for new teachers who came to the district not having implemented RTI, such supports were necessary. Developing a culture of active supports, especially the awareness that there was a support system in place that could be accessed at any time, was crucial to Barnes Elementary. “That’s what we are all here for. We are a support team,” said Gloria. Louise, the SAT chair at Barnes, supported her principal adding that when they had a new second grade teacher, who came in the middle of the year because the class sizes were too big, many staff members went out of their way to make transition easy for the teacher. Louise further explained,

We just went to her, introduced ourselves and let her know that we were here for support, as well as the mentor that she has. So just knowing that there is a support system here and then through our PLTs [Professional Learning Teams] and our meetings that we have, and then we have PD [Professional Development] that’s continually going on, to be sure that she’s kept up to date. And of course, through the school handbook, [which] tells you who the SAT members are and what SAT is so that, she would know if I have a question, I’ve got my colleagues, my grade level team. I know I’ve got my administration I can go to. I know I’ve got this

SAT team I could go to. My mentor, and then... the math coach and myself... So, I think, just having that big support team there [was important].

John added that it can be overwhelming if you are a first or a second year teacher, straight from college having little to no experience let alone with the implementation of RTI “but if you have the framework to work with the young and you have a support structure in place (laughs)” then implementation of such a school-wide initiative can be fairly easy.” As Michelle indicated, “I just think that that’s something that would be really good for a first year teacher or a teacher that’s never done RTI to come into an environment knowing that they were going to be supported in learning everything.”

Summer stated that when a new teacher was interviewed it seemed quite scary and intimidating to implement RTI. Summer stated that the intimidation could be lessened when a teacher had someone to go to. She said, “...it doesn’t scare you away from providing those services for the children...” and as a new teacher walking into a classroom that had several students with academic needs “...could scare you away but having that team to go to really helps because they can give you advice and tell you what direction you’re going next.”

Many of the participants cited leadership support as essential to the implementation of RTI. However, some shared how lack of support may be frustrating. Susan from Barnes stated,

I mean, lots of times with the RTI at our school, we have a good support team... but you know, another school you may not so it’s not going to be - I don’t see it

being as beneficial or as helpful... Just saying we do RTI but then nobody actually tells you how to do it... and a lot of teachers, also, shut it down if they don't have that training because they feel like what they were doing was successful and if they don't know how the new program is going to work they just won't do it.

Support has been an important factor in school-wide reform efforts. Lack of support for continued professional development, especially for practitioners new to the district, tend to make implementation efforts difficult and directly affect fidelity of implementation. John supposed,

You know, it's like Dr. Huggins [Bob] says, if you are going to teach with fidelity or be faithful and committed to doing this right, are you going to do it right or you are just going to say, well I tried that. But if a school sets this up you really got to put those supports in place and have that in place before you even get started. So, you can train your staff and make sure everybody is on the same page, so we are all doing the same thing, because again this is a continuity from one grade to the next and if we are not on the same page and if we are not all speaking the same language and doing the same process, then it's not going to be an effective way to help the children.

Support systems referred to any and all leadership support that was provided to practitioners from the administrative team and the district level team. The interventionists and teachers indicated how their principals supported any effort that lead to improved

student outcome. Teachers and interventionists were encouraged to try new strategies. Rita, an interventionist at Hodges stated how she would ask for money to purchase visual aids and manipulatives that would cater to the students' learning styles. The principal of Hodges indicated how she was always open to innovative ideas and would solicit funding from wherever she could to support what worked.

Dorothy from the district office also shared how her department provided support to schools implementing RTI. She worked with principals to provide resources in terms of funding and interventions so that students in Tier I and Tier II could receive supplementary services. Dorothy indicated that she also liaised with principals so that special education teachers could have schedules that allowed them to provide interventions to struggling learners who were not yet identified. Such efforts as provision of funding and personnel supported the RTI initiative.

All about the children

RTI is a service delivery model that is child-centered. Instruction, supplementary interventions, and eventually special services are geared towards individual students. Teachers shared their efforts to implement interventions that assisted students to meet academic goals. More importantly, the administrators, SAT chair and instructional facilitators seemed to be more proactive at ensuring that services provided were specific to students needs.

Many of the participants emphasized the child-centered nature of their day-to-day activities. Both principals believed that all children can learn and that practitioners could

meet the needs of all the children entrusted in their care. This philosophy was carried over to the kinds of professional development selected for the district. The professional development provided by the office of special programs included the use of Enrich a computer-based student management and data-based monitoring program that could be used to track meetings, interventions, progress and team decision making for any student identified with an inability to respond to classroom instruction-Tier I. In the previous years, training was provided for programs introduced to the district such as Reading First. All these catered to meeting the needs of the student making them children-focused.

Bob, the assistant principal at Barnes, emphasizes the importance of training stating that the training that had been provided for their teachers "...has our students in mind and you know not just students in mind but 'our students' in mind and I think that is a good factor for us too." John, who taught at the same school, supported this saying he knew that meeting students' needs was the focus in their school and that was what made their school so unique. John said they had some serious challenges but it was truly all about the children, "... how we meet the children's needs, how the children learn and how they grow." He further stated, "So, hopefully, the culture is not just what the kids bring to school, but hopefully what teachers don't bring to school – and Miss Louise is great, by the way. She and Dr. Huggins [Bob] are, truly it is all about the children."

John emphasized how every teacher was trying to meet the needs of the children especially those he referred to as intensive care children. He emphasized the fact that their principal encouraged small-group instruction for all children but especially for

really struggling children. “I think that’s the focus here.” John believed. He seemed to emphasize the role of teachers in ensuring that the students could learn. He said,

Absolutely, like I said, we face some serious challenges, daily. It’s just the environments the kids come from but I mean children can learn, all children can learn. I don’t think you should be an educator if you took that away [Laughs].

In support of the child-centered nature of the school, Julie, from Hodges, gave an example of the academic challenges of her niece. Julie revealed,

I had an experience with a niece who went through kindergarten, first and second grade in another school. She couldn’t read, she was going into third grade without being able to read a word. Nobody in that school knew that. My mother knew it because she taught her in a private school but nobody in that school knew that. We brought her here put her in a small group she couldn’t hide around the outside of this... the classroom. So, I mean intervention is just helping children be successful in whatever way.

Hence, in describing their school culture Julie added that they went beyond the belief that ‘all children can learn’. They take it a step further to “make sure they can.” Furthermore, their culture is that they include parents, and other stakeholders to work together to make sure that the student can learn. She gave an example that if the child had to receive intervention before class started or after school, the team ensured that he or she received interventions. Julie said, “I’m just proud to be with this group that we all think the same way, what’s best for children whatever it takes.”

As Sandra eloquently put it,

Our district's philosophy and our motto, our mission is putting children first. And I think when we really embrace that type of instruction, the type where we truly use assessment to individualize instruction and meet students' needs rather than for upgrading or to meet a checklist, I think that truly is really putting children first. It's realizing each student's strengths and weaknesses and capitalizing on their strengths and remediating or enriching their weaknesses so that our children can be successful. That's a teamwork approach too.

In reviewing student data it was evident that students who had been identified as struggling went through a variety of interventions. Tier II at this school used the standard treatment protocol, which had a list of prescribed interventions for students to receive interventions. At the district office, I was also able to obtain a student's documentation that included pre-referral procedures, interventions, assessments and recommendation for special education services. The student's personal information was whited out. I also received two similar documentations from Hodges Elementary.

The documents showed the referral process or RTI process for students dating from September 2009 to April 2012. These student documents also included the ACES and AIMS reports, team meeting discussions and recommendations, interventions and evaluations done by various experts, and the student's progress at each stage. The documents were quite detailed and had numerous pages of information. Every single thing the school had done for this struggling student was documented. Details such as

who referred the student, what the referring teacher had done that was still proving unsuccessful, the initial team meeting and team decision including the recommended intervention and who provided the intervention was included. The documents included completed SAT checklists for student referral and intervention checklists. Some of the interventions included Reading Recovery, Study Island, Corrective Reading, Language for Learning, and Number Worlds. Once a student was referred, all stakeholders including parents, teachers, administrators, interventionists, and guidance counselors were invited to the initial meeting. Other professionals such as school psychologist, special education teacher, speech therapist, and occupational therapist were invited when there was a possibility of student needing special education services. Their expertise in assessment and evaluation of the student was sought at this time in the referral process. All correspondence was documented.

The Hodges principal stated, “So, everybody on that team knows that we are working together for this child and I guess our culture is team work. You know, we know that everybody here is working together for the same goal... You know but it’s important and we do it, we do whatever we need to do and it definitely takes team-work.”

However, based on information from the principals and director of student services, the district had introduced the use of a new data management system in 2012 and the above-mentioned process was now being monitored through Enrich. Each stage of the RTI process was still assessed and reassessed to guide the SAT decision-making.

In all, participants from both schools described the child-centered nature of their instruction and RTI implementation in general. The academic needs of the student were central to the decisions made about instruction and intervention. Collectively, the participants reiterated the need to provide all students with the best possible education and educational experience.

Collective responsibility beyond academics

Both schools identified the importance of parents, children, and school personnel working together to meet student needs. School psychologists, occupational therapists, speech therapists, and special education teachers were involved in the final stages of the referral process, especially when a student needed psycho-educational, visual, auditory, and physical evaluation, and possibly special education or 504 services.

Barnes went beyond providing academic needs to providing physical needs. Gloria described her school as the most impoverished in the district. The population at the school was described as 97.4% receiving free and reduced lunch and that was an indication that the parents may not have had the means to provide for all their children's physical needs. She said they provided school supplies for their children. When they had their open house, parents were able to get free school supplies for their children. She stated that they were fortunate to be able to have partnerships so that most of the important school supplies were donated. However, she said that they still did not have parental involvement in students' academic work, as they would have wished. Gloria said

that this was not because they did not care about their children but because school intimidated them.

They are very intimidated by our school just because they haven't had positive experiences. I mean, I would say that's improved... We also have a 27% Hispanic population. So, you know, unfortunately it's hard to get their trust at times. A lot of them are not legal and they are afraid, to come and be a part [of the school activities].

Furthermore, she stated that the Hispanic population had a large number of individuals who did not have the basic education that they would need to be able to help their children at home. "A lot of times our children have needs because the parents have needs as well. So we've tried to address the children's issues here at school, but have tried to offer that support for parents, as well, so that they will know how to help their children to be successful..." The school has a clothes closet and parents are allowed to come in and gather what they need. She added that periodically they did food drives.

Louise added that the school had food bags that their children would take home on the weekends. She added,

... there is a church that is about a mile down the road from here and they have a clothes closet periodically, but – this year we had some networking with them and they extended an invitation to our school, and our parents a day before the clothes closet was opened to the community, so that our parents could go in and have the opportunity to have first choice with the clothes that were available... And, we've

partnered with another church, recently, which provided Thanksgiving meals for the families... They went to one of the most impoverished communities... and held a fall festival and gave out school supplies and clothes, and food, and things of that sort. And, we're just – we're using all the resources we possibly can to meet the physical needs of the students so that we can meet their educational needs because if they come hungry, we can't meet their educational needs. And, if they come cold or sick, we can't meet those other needs. So we have to meet those [basic needs] first, of course.

Meeting the academic needs of the children at Barnes also means meeting some of the needs for their parents. She described an after school program that they had developed to provide English classes for the parents. This class was set up by the school because of the requirement to effectively communicate with parents. Therefore, twice a week in the evenings, the school would come alive with non-English speaking individuals from the community- not necessarily parents- who would avail themselves to learn to speak English.

Julie, the principal of Hodges Elementary, also stated that they had parental supports set up, though their parental and community involvement was not as extensive as Barnes. Furthermore, Grace, a teacher at Hodges, also described some of the ways they have assisted their students. She said,

Just recently we had – a family had a fire. I mean, they can't – they've got to have their basic needs met. To know that we care about them from the very core of

who they are, and we take them from wherever they are when they come to us.

You know, this is a safe place for them, and they feel that way. I really think that is important.

Hodges does not have a population as impoverished as Barnes, but meeting students' needs beyond academics seemed to be a school virtue that was important to them. Though participants from both schools indicated the need to meet student needs beyond the classroom expectations, this theme seemed to be a predominant cultural norm for Barnes Elementary.

Reshaping individual beliefs and developing a school-wide philosophy

When RTI was initiated at Hodges elementary, the teachers did not have a say in whether it was a good idea. Julie said that in the summer they received an email stating, "...get ready (laughs). Get ready. This is what we are going to be doing. And so, I'm sure they [teachers] had the same feeling I did like, oh my gosh! But you do it." Even though this was a top down initiative, that may have received resistance at the time, some of the active support mentioned earlier helped smooth the rough edges and helped the teachers come around to accepting this initiative as being part and parcel of the school culture.

Julie continued to describe how their individual philosophies have changed based on previous leadership. She said, "Our philosophy one year and this was back when Sally McGee was principle here she gave out shirts that said WIT, whatever it takes, we do whatever it takes." They have continued with this belief. Julie, who was the

next principal, maintained this philosophy and wanted teachers to do whatever it took to meet student needs.

While some teachers like John felt “It’s not that I don’t, already, have enough on my plate...” but he realized that he was already attempting, “...hopefully,” to do some of what was required in the RTI process as an instructor and that they were not really adding on anything that he was not already doing. He concluded that the whole premise was to make him, “...a better instructor. And, I think hopefully the people that developed that [RTI], that’s what their goal was, you know, just make teachers better instructors and meeting the kids at their specific levels rather than just, kind of, throwing darts in the dark and like, I hope I hit that need somewhere.” He added that he thought they were a better school because of RTI. “...We still have serious challenges but I certainly think that it can’t have done anything but help us, over the years, with our referral process. It is, hopefully, making teachers better teachers with meeting needs of children.” The new culture should feel like an additional blend to the already existing culture.

John further affirmed that he thought the culture at the school had changed because the teachers all believed and understood that it really was the best way to instruct children. They just simply looked at it as another way of teaching more effectively.

Louise described Gloria’s take on redeveloping a school culture that not only focused on academics but really cared for the children.

...she asked for each of us, each day when we come in, because some days we come in as she is today, not feeling well, but you come on any way, and... So she

gave us the gold medal and reminded us each day when we are here, to look for the gold. Look for the gold in every child. Because some days it is frustrating, working with children who have such needs, but all of these children, there is gold in each and every one of them, so, you know, she gave us all a gold medal and asked us to look for the gold and each month at our faculty meeting, that's something she goes back to, "Let's reflect on this. Who's got some gold they want to share?" Then we just recently did the energy bus book. I'm not sure if you are familiar with that but she's our CEO and the head of our energy bus and it's really inspiring us too, again, to look for the gold and what you need to do to help build the team up here and build your colleagues up, but also build our students up.

The two administrators see the implementation of RTI as important and they include questions about RTI during the interview process of new hires. While Julie, the principal at Hodges, had developed questions dedicated to RTI, Gloria asked questions that address components of RTI. Gloria said,

We talk about the intervention process during, interviews, because I want to know what they [new hires] know and what they might need to know. Now, that's certainly not going to deter me from hiring someone. It just lets me know where they are. What they know about it. So I can know what to share with them and where we need to be with them when they come into the building. So, just an awareness of the process...

Julie's interview questions are a little more detailed. She thinks that it is important to know just how much knowledge of RTI her new hires have. She revealed,

...we ask some RTI questions in our interviews so that's how we surface with people that have heard about it that know about it. How do you address children with needs? What do you think about small group? All of the things we believe in those are on our interview questions. So they are already coming in our building with a belief in it- and then they learn how we do it but they already believe in all of the pieces of Response to Intervention and assessment pieces and small-group pieces and providing intervention outside the classroom and they already know... already believe in it so it's just, it's really easy to give them something like this or such interviews to them.

However, Summer, a recent hire at Barnes, stated that even though RTI questions may be asked, it was not necessary because, "... at our school we have such a strong committee and RTI support that anybody that you hire [would get help]."

Also noted was that the cultural shift had impacted the classroom setup. Julie stated that if anyone were to walk in a classroom they would see small groups and teachers' conferencing with students. She expressed that the teachers had gotten rid of their desks in most of their classrooms because "it's not their room; it's the students' room." When she went into a classroom she joined in on the instruction, joining the small groups or students on the computer. Julie further reiterated this cultural shift stating,

We firmly believe that instruction cannot be addressed as whole group. And nothing – and we have a rule here- nothing gets taught to the mastery whole group. So, small group is just a normal, I mean, it's almost a Tier I, and by the way it's a Tier I. Everybody gets small group in the classroom. It's different here because of that reason.

During my formal observation of classroom instruction, the classroom management system- Daily Five- was in progress. Five students were seen working on math problems on a computer, five students sat in front of the smart board engaged in an interactive math game, four students sat at a table completing math problems, and five students were lined up next to the teacher waiting to take turns to conference with her. Julie added that,

Sometimes you walk in and you see everybody in there reading silently. We have silent reading and we believe in that firmly... 30 minutes of it a day not just your little 15 minute clip because we realize that it takes 15 minutes to choose a book, get it out start reading even though they already have their selection of books nearby for their levels... and the children know their levels and they know why they are different from their neighbor and that's okay, you know, we have already been through all that stuff.

This cultural shift had taken effect even on the children. They knew what was expected of them in each classroom. Julie proudly described a time when she had an interview team come in with their accreditation team last year and they asked for

students. She was setting up something in the back of the media center and heard one of the interviewing team say, “Let’s talk about your media center. What would you like to see different in your media center?” And then a student said, “More books on my Lexile level”, and the member of the accreditation team was surprised. Lexile? The student continued describing the books that were available and said that he wanted an 800 Lexile level “...we just don’t have enough books out there on the 800 Lexile level.” Julie further stated that it was the culture of the school for everyone including the children to know about an individual’s academic strengths and weaknesses. Anastasia, the interventionists further disclosed,

...and the kids would come in my room and go, this is not my Lexile level but do you think I can handle it? You know, they know to ask those questions. I mean, I had them come in and say, “Miss. Stone, this one is going to be above what I can read by myself. Will you help me when we do small group?” You know, so I mean they truly are aware of what they are capable and what is above what they are capable of but they know if they hear it they can still do it.

Students document their reading and math progress. Walking around Hodges Elementary, I was able to see charts created by children showing their progress using the Hundred Book Challenge program and other computer generated charts showing their progress in math based computer activities.

When comparing the two schools, Hodges seemed to have a stronger cultural shift that embraced the implementation of RTI than Barnes. The participants from Hodges

constantly mentioned how they had changed their personal beliefs and had incorporated RTI practices in their instruction. However, culture is not static. It is continuously evolving and the changes are usually based on a novel ideology that best suits the group at the time. As Sandra stated, "...and my philosophy is still changing. It's a daily thing!"

Importance of data

RTI provides educators with systemic measures of student progress which yield data in order for teachers to make important instructional decisions (Batsche, et al., 2006)

In analyzing some of the teacher roles, they talked about the collection of data, of course in addition to instruction, as being vital. John affirmed,

Be sure you have collected as much data to show other people that these are the challenges this child is facing but, know that you know it's only helping you as a teacher by doing that because it's going to set up a support network that's going to help you to meet the needs of that student. I mean, again, it helps you to realize you are not – this is not all on you. The burden is not yours. You have a support network that will help you through this process. And, again, it's a scientific way (laughs) of approaching the child's needs. You are not just kind of, let's see if this works or this works because you have people with experiences who have known what you can do to help this child in the classroom.

It is the data collected that can guide decisions about what will be done to help the struggling child. It is also this data that can be shared with parents for them to see the kind of progress their children are making. Any small gains is always cause for

celebration said Anastasia, “ But, I mean not bragging on us but when you look at our children that we pull and you look at their scores, whether it would be math or its PASS these children are coming up. This is working; this program works if you work it... We have the data to prove it”. During my observations at Hodge’s for example, I saw displays of student reading graphs. These provided evidence of the use of data collection and progress monitoring of student reading. Graphs also displayed student math progress using a computer based math program. I was able to see samples of student writing, and also parent writing. The school involves parents in student activities and these include provision of writing samples for students to read.

The Hodges principal further emphasized their need for data collection. She stated,

And the interventions we use we keep a data sheet. I don know if I have a copy of it but for every intervention and every assessment we provide, we record the data and we have data meetings that we would meet. But Response to Intervention is just providing a child what he needs on his level and making sure that we’ve assessed it to know what that means, to know what is [he needs].

Julie further stated that data collection had become a fabric of their cultural practices. She specified,

We meet with our parents, our stakeholders and make sure that they have a data picture. We start the first day of school and any child - any child that has any piece of data out of line like this one only had one, [Points at a student

assessment] but we still met because we want to make sure that [we address] whatever kept them from not meeting that; and it was only four points away.

You know, this was more of a celebration because look how many of the data points we've worked out for this child. But, for every child that might have a piece of data that's not inline we meet and we make a plan. So, the culture of our school basically is that same RTI kind of feeling, you know. Every decision we make is based on the data piece and intervention is provided in some form or fashion. That pretty much drives our school and everything we do.

Both schools focused on the use of data for decision-making. The principal at Hodges shared how since the inception of RTI, their team meetings and discussion had become highly elevated. Each team member was able to use data to justify their decisions. Julie stated,

Our conversations are at a much higher level when we come to the table to refer for intervention. When teachers, you know, bring something to the table, all of the interventions that she used or had provided for this child, parents are very satisfied of the SAT team.

Stakeholders' involvement

All stakeholders are involved in the progress of the students. Furthermore, the students have also instilled in themselves a culture to look out for themselves. Julie stated that the children are also involved in their own academic goals. They know where they

are and where they need to be. Children have a vested interest in their academic growth. When Julie talked about stakeholders she included the children.

Anastasia, an interventionist at Hodges, saw herself as the one who “...sees the problem that we might need to [address]; looking for those things that we might need to work on and starting getting the process started to get help for the students then, you know... I think helping the students work on what they need to be able to work toward a goal and make progress in what they are working on.”

Summer saw her role as the general education teacher as being very integral because she was the only person, a lot of times, that was in the classroom with the student, “...so you are the one that has to relay all of the information and the one that’s responsible for referring them [students] if needed because you see the work that they’re doing.” Throughout the process, she was still the one that people went to ask questions and she had to make sure that the decisions that were made were the right ones.

Tracey, the SAT chair at Hodges, said that the teachers had to let her know about struggling students. By the time teachers were talking to her about possibly a referral or taking it to the SAT, the teachers had already been through Tier I, and Tier II. She then set up the meetings, completed documentation for the meetings, and provided resources, such as books or manuals that she said had interventions. She said she tried to help the teachers get what they needed and she was the go-between the parent and the teachers.

Sally, a second grade teacher, reading specialist, and first grade interventionist at Hodges, said that teachers had to let her know if a student was struggling. Grace on the

other hand, said she saw her role as one of an observer and gatherer of information. She felt that this role was important especially when she met with parents and the parents indicated that their child seemed to struggle with homework. She and the parents would discuss what they have observed and would come up with ways to assist the student. She said that sometimes parents might have noticed something at home "... that kind of gives me a head start to look closely at that child. So, [there is] the initial observation and then the process of putting them into a one-on-one situation or small-group situation in the classroom..." She felt this was her responsibility.

To sum it all up, it takes everyone in the school to help with a struggling child but, more importantly, the team that works closely with the child would take a leading role. Julie confirmed that,

It takes the whole village working together to get this intervention provided to students. They might not have transportation and we figure how we get around that. We may not have time to provide small group during this time of the school day because of their schedule... our homework center will pay Anastasia to stay after school to work with the small group. We meet with our parents, our stakeholders and make sure that they have a data picture. We start the first day of school and any child - any child that has any piece of data out of line like this one only had one [points at an Enrich data sheet] but we still met because we want to make sure that whatever kept them from not meeting their goal, and it was only four points away, is addressed.

Many of the participants shared how they were involved in the RTI process each clearly stating what they felt their roles were in ensuring students' needs were met. They felt that they were involved in tailoring instruction and intervention so that the student would be academically successful.

No turning back

Despite some of the challenges of implementing RTI, many of the participants, especially the administrators, expressed a high approval of this school-wide initiative. Teachers expressed how RTI had changed their practice and had made them better teachers. Interventionists saw the benefits when students made gains in reading and math. Administrators saw the benefits to both the students and the teachers. Participants felt that RTI was a more organized method of tracking student progress and providing necessary interventions to those who were struggling to meet grade level standards.

John, who was one of the teachers who was once considered skeptical about RTI, indicated that RTI made him a better teacher.

Well, for me as a teacher, I would think that – I would hope that RTI makes my instruction more effective. That my instruction is targeted to a specific need...

But, I hope, and I know for me personally, that if I look at it with open eyes that it is helping my instruction. Hopefully, that it is making me a better teacher and that while I get kids at all different levels that I can meet all [their] needs.

Anastasia indicated that they had come too far, "... Yeah, we have come way too far to step backwards." The principals at the schools stated that they had seen the benefits of RTI and would recommend its use in all schools. Sandra a third grade teachers further stated that it had been years since she referred a student,

"...and a lot of that is because we have closed the gap before they get to 3rd grade by having all of these interventions. And I think by this time of the year in 3rd grade if they are struggling readers we would be at the table referring because they had all of [these] interventions prior to the SAT and none of those seem to meet their needs..."

However, Sandra also stated that this year she had a very high achieving class and this might have accounted for the reduced referrals. Though she restated, "I do have probably five or six that are border line when they originally came... and part of it is just meeting with them daily those- that are on the border line. It is just meeting with them daily, having discussions with them. I'm talking about 5 minute meetings..." These weak students are not going through the SAT process but are receiving small-group instruction and conferencing within the general education classroom. Sandra further added,

We all have our caveat; we just got to see that it does work. You've just got to try it. So I think actually having an open door and allowing people to come in... because this is a growing opportunity for me too... I love for a new teacher to come and observe because I'm like, I need feedback, I want you to tell me what you thought was effective and what was ineffective and send it back to me and

let's talk around the table, because we grow from one another as well just like we expect children to. So, I think being able to provide support and having an open door and collaborative planning with people that are going through this is crucial.

Despite some of the challenges that educators at Barnes and Hodges had faced, they would not trade the benefits of implementing RTI. Participants from Hodges felt that RTI had improved student outcomes and based on their school report card, they seemed to have steadily improved since 2008. The participants from Hodges said the RTI process had benefitted their struggling student population. The RTI initiative did not only benefit the students but also benefited the teachers. The participants from Barnes emphasized how RTI changed their teaching. The participants felt that teachers had improved their practice over time to become effective teachers. The participants from Hodges had shifted their instructional practices from whole group teaching to small group, direct, and differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all the students entrusted in their care. The participants from Barnes had become more children-focused, emphasizing the need to meet students' needs.

Contradictions and misconceptions

There seemed to be several contradictions concerning the RTI process at each school. Though many of the general education participants knew their first line of contact, they seemed to have limited knowledge of the process as it went beyond their referral. In keeping with student needs in the classroom, general education teachers need to keep abreast with the progress the student is making outside his/her classroom. This

will ensure that all stakeholders are each doing their part for the academic success of the students.

Furthermore, nothing was said about the behavioral component of RTI. Many practitioners believed RTI was purely academic though it addresses both academic and behavioral components of skill deficits.

Both administrators talked about using the DOMINEE as a screening tool, however, not all teachers from Barnes who participated in this study used this screening tool. Effective RTI implementation requires accurate implementation of all components. Summer was one of the participants who stated that they used non-standardized assessments to screen students and find out areas of weakness. She said,

... We did testing at the beginning of the year with our students. We had some things that we worked on, and just seeing where we started, and how we are building upon that... Well, it's just things that we pulled out on our own...they were just things that we put together ourselves... It wasn't, like, a standardized [assessment]... It was just things that we felt like we needed to see, to allow us to see where each student was...

Some participants also felt that if they did not refer students, or had no student already in the referral process, they were not 'doing RTI'. Summer, was one of the general education teachers who did not have much experience working with exceptional children, for example, and assumed she was not implementing RTI because

With response to intervention, I haven't had a lot to do with it because I've never actually referred a student but we have been taken through the process on how to do it using the Enrich Program on the computer. We've been taken through that and we've been told what each step is, so I'm aware of what the steps are and who to contact and that type of thing using my references. But I have not actually taken a student through the process.

However, it was evident further along in the conversation that she had students who were struggling and based on her communication with other staff members she was implementing RTI. She said,

...I have a couple of students now that are pulled out for reading work with another teacher so that they are also getting help from another teacher... and when it continues they meet with the parents and they end up placing them in special services of some type... We actually have an SAT team and I don't know the members right offhand but I have a note book that has them in there. And I would go to the chairs and the co-chair first and talk with them about it. But then, you also have the members of that team that you can go to throughout.

Fundamental knowledge, such as knowing all the stakeholders in the RTI process, should be basic knowledge for all teachers in a school implementing RTI. It is therefore imperative that roles are clearly designated and that each member of the team knows what other members are supposed to do.

Some of the participants had misconceptions about what school culture meant, with many resorting to describing the school demographics without talking about the school norms and values. Many times the researcher rephrased the question adding that she wanted to know what they as a school valued, but many participants still ended up describing the student population including their families' socio-economic status. Grace for example described school culture as "...the student's ethnicity, their backgrounds, their socio-economic status in their environment at home and how that translates in the school."

Even after a brief description of what culture was the responses seemed to vary drastically between participants. Here are some examples.

Sandra: ...you mean primarily like Caucasian and African American culture? Is that what you are speaking of? What do you mean culture...I think it's what makes up a school. I think it's...a lot of us here we're family oriented. I think that we're very close here, staffs... I think it's the race, and the socio-economic factors that make up the schools. That's what I think for culture... I think we're very strong in reading. Our goals are... very strong here and meeting the needs of our students, conferencing, [meeting] small groups, working one-on-one in small groups. That is just part of our culture here... Differentiated instructions...

Rita: Like the economic status or race?... ["Our motto or our vision is that, you know, all children can learn" said Mary]... and putting those students first... ["And we also do small group or one-on-one we'll do also. Three groups each for

the first and second grade on small groups.”]... Strictly first grade... In a day, we have three groups, four students.

Grace: Okay, Hodges is a rural community outside of the school but the kids that come to our school are from a rural area of the city or town...and they are mostly poor...poor income, low income. I'm not sure exactly our percentage but we have a pretty high free and reduced lunch here and we, while that is, I don't want to say an issue because it's really not an issue...but that is something that we have to take into account. For the types of kids that we are getting and the kind of background knowledge that they may or may not have, the resources that they may or may not have and we take them from where they are.

Summer: There is not a ton of diversity I would say. I mean, you know, it's a good mix but it's not like we don't have any second language students... There is other diversity, you know

Ann: Culture is like traditions that any group of people have... So I guess school culture would be the things that our school does traditionally or how we combined other children that come from different backgrounds.

Tracey: The culture would be the environment that the kids are brought up in. The values, the teachings, the things that are important to them, to their families... But these kids, they come to us from where they live and it's our job or our responsibility to try to take this part of their lives and put them together and make

them one that we all could get along with and work with and it's, you know, stressing that we are all different...

However, some of the more experienced participants described their school culture a little more clearly. Sally for example stated that school culture was "...everything in the school... the culture starts the minute you walk in the door...actually parking lot...the crossing guard up front...bus driver... teachers...students...safety patrol..." Nevertheless, when asked about cultural changes within the school since the inception of RTI Sally said, "... honestly I would say it's been about the same. We do have a lot of free and reduced lunch at school and that has been for years even when I came so I would not say that there has been a big change..."

Furthermore, there were contradictions as far as the meaning of progress monitoring and how it was actually done. Here are some examples.

Tracey: ... so, technically everyone is progress monitored throughout the year but on paper only our, struggling readers are the readers that are below grade level, mainly the ones that got reading recovery in small group those are the ones that are ... Tested, yes that are actually documented on paper. Now, of course, I do make notes about you know the children that I'm progress monitoring throughout the year just based on what I'm seeing and then the next time I meet with them I go back and refer to those notes to see where we need to go in the future, and make sure to do a check on, you know, well I told you to work on short vowels, and we went through the whole sounds of the short vowels now are you using

them? So I check on that. So, it's kind of twofold everybody is progress monitored and then the ones who are below grade level which are with the Reading Recovery and small-group interventionists, are documented on paper with the DOMINEE

Summer: I do lots of different types of progress monitoring... but that allows me to go back and just check and make sure that they got what we were doing. I don't necessarily keep a checklist, I do, do some check lists but a lot of it is just me looking to see what they're getting and what they're not getting.

When asked about the RTI process or who their first contact people were, some participants had difficulty recalling their SAT chairs or the RTI process in general. Especially when asked about Tier II and III, many general education teachers had limited knowledge about what was done with the students at this level.

Summer: Good question. I mean, I've not gone that far. Oh man, I know I've been told and I should probably know, but I don't know. Well I think Tier II and Tier III is when other people should be getting involved. And I also think that I remember with Tier II and Tier III, that that's when they plan other interventions. You know, classroom interventions happen in Tier I but that's when, maybe, they're pulled out and other work is done with them, maybe testing is done or whatever needs to be done to actually implement what you're trying to implement. Am I right?

Obviously, educators need more information about this service delivery model. Comparing the two elementary schools, teachers at Hodges Elementary seemed to be well informed about what RTI is and how it should be implemented. However, the principal at Barnes did indicate that they had new faculty in the earlier grades that were still in the process of learning about RTI. What is more evident is that pre-service teachers have limited exposure to the tenets of RTI, an initiative that they should be implementing from day one of employment.

Necessary knowledge

It is apparent that many general education teachers had limited knowledge of how to implement all components of the RTI process. Many did not necessarily understand that they had misconceptions or inadequate knowledge. This may be attributed to the lack of exposure during college training, limited professional development at the work place and maybe simply a lack of interest in the RTI service delivery process. Regardless of the reason for this limited knowledge, the implementation of RTI can only be effective when all the stakeholders know what it is and the comprehensive nature of its process.

It is important to note that the participants had variations in describing what they thought RTI was.

John: It is being able to assess your students at whatever level they are at, and designing your instruction to meet those specific needs. To reassess to see if your instruction is working...if you need to adjust it or modify it, and hopefully, meet students' needs at their levels, since we have lots of different children at lots of

different levels. The days of old school where you had teachers [give] whole group instruction [and] too many fall through the crack [are gone]. So, um, I guess, it's that multi-level instruction where you really are individualizing instruction for each student.

Natalie: It is a process that... helps my students that are below grade level... that may have other issues that we need to do extra work on. And I don't, actually, have anybody in there this year... so far.

Summer: With Response to Intervention, I haven't had a lot to do with it because I've never actually referred a student but we have been taken through the process on how to do it using the Enrich Program on the computer. We've been taken through that and we've been told what each step is, so I'm aware of what the steps are and who to contact and that type of thing using my references. But I have not actually taken a student through the process. So, I think once I do that I will be more familiar with it.

Sally: ... my understanding is that interventions [are given] as early as possible, that we can use to try to keep students from going ahead to resource and be special Ed. To be able to meet their needs before they go to that... before they get to that stage, I should say...

Mary: Just for me, it's a program to help keeps students out of resource like an intervention to intervene, like a program to intervene before they are placed in resource... to hopefully avoid them being placed

When asked when they first heard about RTI, many participants stated that they learned about it at their work places through their principals or from a district office designee.

Julie: ...and I heard about it, I guess it kind of came to me in two different directions pretty much at the same time. I guess it was 10 years we started, Reading First. I was hearing from Dorothy, 'RTI and Reading First the State and the National Group RTI' and I was recognizing it, 'Oh, I saw that thing. Oh my goodness, that's what we talked about the other day' As far as our formal RTI, we took it further with Richard Arlington... look at what really matters in Response to Intervention and that's how I found out from our Special Services... and I guess it's been around a long time but as far as formally addressing it about 10 years ago through Special Services and she [Dorothy] is rebranding it and trying to get our, referral system more in tune to Tier I, Tier II, Tier III and how we meet and what we provide and the records that we keep... Also hearing about it at the same time from Reading First Group as we met a lot in one year and that was a federal program too. We were expected to move fast because of the Reading First because we got a lot of money from Reading First [and] they could hold us accountable. The change is much harder in a school without the money and it just hasn't happened in all of our schools the same way. We signed up all formal documents and the federal government told us this is what we had to do and we did it. It was hard and we met a lot and we read a lot, we discussed a lot.

[However] we hadn't had Reading First money coming in over three years now

and we wouldn't change, we wouldn't change if we had to. They've tried to bring DIBBLES but we are not giving up DOMINEE and there is just - we are not going back.

Summer: I want to think it was in one of my methods courses and we discussed how that was a step that could be taken when students needed extra help if that school enforced it but I never actually had a class that focused on it and broke it down into steps

Michelle: ... and, I heard about RTI, I guess I was more on the cutting edge of it because of being in Special Ed. they started out talking to us about RTI and how it was going to impact special needs students especially. So, we kind of started that whole process of bringing it into the schools and this is what it's going to look like and this is who is going to deal with it and that kind of thing. So, we were kind of the ones that spurred it to the top, to have it here.

The participants were asked to provide what they considered basic information that any faculty would be required to know in order to fully implement RTI with effectiveness. The participants' responses varied, however, a few core areas were cited as being important. These included knowledge of: the components of RTI, the process of identifying struggling learners, process of referring students to special education and the roles of each stakeholder in the RTI process.

Barriers to implementation

Keeping in line with the basic knowledge that the participants thought all teachers should know about RTI, the participants also described additional areas that could impact implementation of RTI. The participants talked about these areas as areas that could be considered barriers to implementation.

Professional development: Participants cited relevant professional developments as necessary for effective implantation of RTI. When asked what issues prevented implementation efforts Gloria stated,

Well, I think definitely a lack of professional development, as far as, RTI process goes. But, I think our district is really good at providing those trainings and opportunities and we try to have as much of that here as possible. I think teachers sometimes get frustrated because they can't figure out exactly what's going on but we've, also, tried to encourage them to go to the experts within the building. You know, it's okay if you don't know.

Sandra from Hodges also added,

You cannot initiate or hold students and teachers accountable if they haven't been properly trained. In mean, we say model for the students. You can only do it if it has been modeled for you, you know. And I think that goes to life-long learning. I mean, I think teachers have to go through those developmental opportunities. We can continue to learn and grow and we wouldn't have had this had we not had those opportunities. I thrive off professional development myself

Professional development (PD) offers educators necessary knowledge and skills to be able to implement programs, interventions, and a myriad of school reforms effectively. If educators are not able to learn about RTI at college, then PDs are their next best options. Many districts today have set aside PD days when educators can receive and share vital information that pertains to instruction, classroom management, progress monitoring, testing, professional and ethical values. As Sandra eloquently put it, "...you can only be as effective as your knowledge base!"

Fidelity of implementation: Fidelity of implementation goes along with professional development. Fidelity of implementation only comes about when teachers are exposed to the appropriate PD, and constant support, including internal and external observations, are done to ensure all stakeholder are complying with the procedural requirements. Some participants cited PD and fidelity of implementation as important to the implementation of RTI

Bob: I say, definitely [PD] because if you aren't trained... the whole phrase of teaching with fidelity... the program that's been chosen for your school or for your district based on a committee who's gotten together to find what's going to be best for our students, then you are not giving that [program] a fair chance to work. You can't honestly say when you come to a student who has a problem with that program or that curriculum that the child is struggling with it because you haven't delivered all of it to them. You haven't given them everything out of that program to really find out what matched and what didn't match. So, I think it's very important to have the knowledge of that program

Additional areas of concern were teacher attitudes towards implementation of RTI. Susan stated that some teachers weren't as willing to try their first strategies, such as in-classroom teacher intervention. She said that this would be harmful if a school had somebody that was set in their ways and they were not really open to trying different things. Summer further indicated that some teachers may be a little intimidated with the whole process especially " [if he/she] doesn't know the process like they think they should and you don't have that team, then they might not be as willing to go ahead and start that process because they don't know what direction to go."

As John put it,

Louise, she presented this to us seven or eight years ago...I'm not sure how long ago but, she got not a lot of resistance but a lot of raised eyebrows and shaking heads. She persisted and she approached us in a, manner that wasn't really threatening and, she is really knowledgeable about it. She has been a very important part, I think, of this becoming part of Barnes and what we are doing here, I would say.

Bob, the assistant principal at Barnes, also raised concerns about how teachers have responded to any change in school. He said,

Well, I'll tell you what I've heard a teacher say one time unfortunately, was, 'I taught it but they didn't learn' and if you are teaching and they are not learning it, you are not really teaching it. So, I have heard that said unfortunately.

John: It humbles you as a teacher, I mean really you have to submit yourself to realize, what I'm doing is not working. Like Dr. Huggins says, if you are a teacher, if that's what you call yourself you have to teach one way or another... and if your way is not working you need to find some other way (laughs) around the problem if you are going to be successful... if you are going to be an effective teacher. Otherwise, why are you in this profession?

Class sizes: Participants also spoke about class sizes as being a challenge. They stated that individualizing interventions or using small-group methods of intervention might be difficult with large class sizes. With many schools downsizing on teachers without the student population reducing, class sizes have continued to get larger. Tasha, a general education teacher at Hodges Elementary stated,

Yes, our large class sizes are huge challenges this year. I have 27 first graders with no assistant and that is not just my class. We have three first grades and both of the other ones had 26 - the ratio is 26 to 1. So, large class sizes are a huge challenge. I think that the reason it's the challenge is not because they are bad kids. They are not bad kids. There are a lot of them, you know. So, we are going to [crowd them] in our classroom.

Smaller class sizes make it easier for teachers to be able to implement small-group instruction. However, using classroom management systems such as the Daily Five used at Hodges Elementary may make it a little easier to form groups and have students

rotate within groups. Teachers are therefore able to conference with students and address students' individual needs.

Scheduling and Time: The principal at Hodges was more concerned about the amount of time available to provide interventions to students. When asked some of the challenges of implementing RTI, Anastasia, the interventionist said,

Not enough time in the day for what we do, my groups are scheduled to have three third grade, three first grades, and three, second grades. So, I sit in nine classrooms a day. Some of those are inclusion, most of them we pull out but I limit [that to] 30 minutes and a lot of times we go over those 30 minutes because 30 minutes is not going to get that child everything he needs. We may do math this block and a little bit later I have groups that I go back and do pull for reading outside. So, I'm always behind. I'm never on time, never because there is not enough time in the day to do what we need to do for these kids it's not. We have from 7:30 to 2 o'clock ...

Julie: I have asked to lengthen our school day, I told my district office, and I said I could probably squeeze on my bus riders on two buses. We have four right now, you can have the other two just give me two and let me have the 30 to 45 minute longer day.

Scheduling may also be a challenge when trying to ensure that students receive the various Tiers of interventions that they need. A student who needs interventions in both math and reading would need an extra hour in the day set aside for interventions.

Would this mean missing core instruction? These are difficult choices that administrators have to make to meet student needs.

The unexpected

What stood out as unusual was the fact that when asked about the number of students referred, the SAT chair and administrator at Barnes stated that they were just about the same percentage population as before they implemented RTI. Even though the general education teachers who were interviewed said they referred fewer students using the RTI because they were able to give early interventions and prevent identification, the numbers of students identified as needing special education services were still about the same. This is what the Barnes SAT co-chair and Hodges special education teacher had to say,

Bob: Well, I've been a part of, SAT teams pretty much for nine years now and I'd say it's really about the same. You are heavier on referrals at the younger grades...lower grade levels than you are at the upper grade levels because, hopefully, by then you've caught them all...the ones who need more individual attention. I don't think it really has changed a whole lot over the years, if anything it may have decreased a little bit in the number of referrals, but I won't say significantly. We look at that a lot when it comes especially in the past with PACT testing. You had your cut off line of how many would form a sub group for the test and we've always hovered, maybe, a little above the cut off line; in some

years we've been 10 to 15 students above that cut off line. But, it's never dropped drastically and it's never just shot up drastically.

Michelle: Right now, I think our rate of referral is about what it should be about 10 to 12% and more times than not, they are qualifying. Like I said, by the time they get to Tier III they have exhausted everything and we have figured that yeah they need something else.

However, Michelle felt there was a reduction in the number of students referred. She said her caseload 11 years ago was larger than it was now. Ann, a general education teacher at Barnes, indicated that she had seen “a dramatic decrease in referrals because we are doing more before getting to the process. So we are trying more things in the classroom whereas before we just did a referral”

RTI Perception models

Even with the reshaping of individual philosophies and beliefs, many of the participants still had different perceptions of how RTI was being implemented in their schools including why it was being implemented. The participants varied in their responses when describing what RTI was and how it was implemented in their schools. Some of the participants focused on RTI as a means of referring students to special education, others focused on RTI being a better way to instruct students, while others focused on the use of interventions for struggling students. The participants' individual ideologies may have prompted the variations in emphasis, and consequently the varied descriptions of RTI and how it was being implemented in their schools. For example,

some participants saw RTI as a means to *differentiate instruction* to meet student needs. To them the RTI process began with identifying areas of weakness, designing instruction to address these needs, documenting progress and only beginning the referral process after intervention. Participants who saw RTI as a *referral process* went straight to the SAT teach chair when they had a struggling student. Hence, their RTI process began with seeking help from the SAT team.

In reviewing the different descriptions of RTI, six perception models were developed. Appendix R is a detailed description of the six perception models and what distinguished each one from the other. Based on the various responses already described, the participants identified with specific perception models.

Preventative Model: Practitioners view the primary goal of the use of RTI as keeping students in the general education track by providing all necessary support and remediation for students to master skills. These participants perceive the prevention of over-identification of students in special education as key to the implementation of RTI. Participants with this perspective had these descriptions:

Gloria: I think it [RTI] allows teachers to be the best that they can be, [and] it's what we do best. It's a process where we can, also, prevent kids from going into the special education program. I mean, I truly believe that kids are probably over-identified.

Sally: My understanding is that we use interventions as early as possible... that we can use to try to keep students from going ahead to resource and be special Ed.

To be able to meet their needs before they go to that... before they get to that stage I should say.

Sandra: The goal for RTI is to promote student success, life long achievement, to help them overcome any huddles early on so that we would close the achievement gap and that all students are successful.

Referral Model: RTI is viewed as an organized method of referral used to systematically refer struggling students for special education services. The mindset is once a student is referred the student should end up in special education services. General education teachers who had this view saw their roles as being the ones who had the task of referring students for special education services.

Grace: It's a three-tiered model that we have in place as a school to help students who struggle. As a classroom teacher I'm able to observe students everyday and I'm able to, um, fairly quickly notice that there are issues in reading all areas... phonics, vocabulary, comprehension... and I'm able to refer that child to an SAT team if it gets to the point of that being the route we need to go.

Natalie: It is a process that helps my students that are below grade level that may have other issues that we need to do extra work on. If we feel that we need to refer somebody, we let them [SAT chair and co-chair] know and then they come in and do observations.

Summer: I haven't had a lot to do with it...I have never actually referred a student. Basically, as far as what it looks like, it is going through the process and

coming up with interventions throughout the process to help the child and make sure that what you're pushing forward is what is actually needed. I think the main goal [of RTI] would be to just make sure that each student is referred in the same way, and that they each get the interventions that are needed to make sure that they are going through the process correctly so that you don't refer one child this way and another child this way and have different RTI. It's all done the same way and the steps are taken the same.

Instructional Model: RTI is viewed as a model for effective instruction where teachers are encouraged to use evidence-based instruction for all students. Emphasis is on teacher practice and the provision of highly effective instruction to ensure student success. This model focuses on the teacher, and evaluation of the RTI model focuses on classroom instruction and not student outcome. For practitioners with this perspective, professional development would focus on instructional strategies and classroom management strategies. Participants with this perspective shared how they felt implementing RTI had improved their practice and made them better teachers.

John: [RTI is] to assess your students at whatever level they are at, and designing your instruction to meet those specific needs. Well, for me as a teacher, I would think that – I would hope that RTI makes my instruction more effect, that, uh, that, you know, that my instruction is targeted to a specific need.

Bob: And so that's, you know, my view point of the RTI process that, you know, it's just coming up with just different ways for this child to learn what this child is learning in the regular whole group setting.

Julie: So, our main goal for RTI is to provide the instruction for a child to be successful. For the child to be at a successful grade level that's the whole point of everything we do. Response to Intervention is just providing a child, um, what he needs on his level and making sure that we've assessed it to know what that means, to know what it is.

Intervention Model: RTI is viewed as providing struggling learners with interventions for them to be successful in the classroom. Emphasis is on the use of scientifically validated interventions for student success. Many of the general education teachers who participated in this study did not have this perception of RTI. However, the interventionist who participated in this study viewed RTI as providing interventions for struggling learners so that the students could be successful in the classroom. The interventionists saw their roles in the implementation of RTI as being integral. Practitioners with this perspective focus on what they do to help struggling students.

Tasha: I think our main goal is to find out their area of weakness and to find interventions to meet those needs first before seeing if we need to refer them for further testing

Mary: it's a program... like an intervention to intervene. Like a program to intervene before they are placed in resource to hopefully avoid them being placed.

Jennifer: [The goal of RTI is if] they've had several interventions. Like for first grade, maybe they had twenty weeks of Reading Recovery plus small group. And if they still haven't made any progress then that's when they'll consider going to the next step, just refer to testing. But we do several interventions first.

Process Model: RTI is viewed as a process of providing assistance at various stages to struggling students. The movement between and within the various stages is seen as fluid. This view of RTI is similar to the Referral Model except in the Referral Model stages are seen as leading in one direction and the notion of students ending up in special education services is emphasized. In the Process Model, the perfection of the process is emphasized. RTI is viewed as being highly data-driven process. The administrators and SAT chairs emphasized the data-driven nature of RTI. Team decisions are data-driven for the process to be effective. The emphasis is also on the use of the same method for all students so that no one student goes through the RTI process in a different way than another. In other words the process is clearly stated with all stakeholders following the exact same procedure with struggling students.

Louise: Response to Intervention I think... the process in people's minds have changed over the years. I think from my perspective and what I've seen is years ago, people used to think, oh when you refer to child SAT or RTI, you were going to refer them or get them out of your classroom and you won't have to deal with it anymore. But with the RTI and with the trainings that we've gone through, basically my understanding of it is, is when you see a child who has a need or are struggling in the classroom, then you need to decide specifically what that child's

need is, or what their weakness is and then get together with your team and strategize ideas on what you can do in the classroom to help that child to be successful... Well, as the instructional facilitator here at Barnes and coach here of the SAT team, I work with teachers. We have PLTs where we come to the table and we meet periodically and we discuss our standards. We discuss student work. We take a look at it and see if the student work and the assessments that we bring to the table match the instruction that is going on in the classrooms. And so, my role in the model is if a teacher is having a child who's having difficulty in their classroom, and they are struggling with a particular skill or with behavior, the start of it is a dialogue takes place. A lot of times we are a part of that dialogue, if there is a [parent] conference that takes place. And then, once we go through that process then my role is to help them come up with strategies to help the child be successful.

Tracey: Well, the teachers have to let me know... we are so inclined to getting with RTI. By the time they are talking to me about possibly a referral or taking it to the SAT, we have already been through to Tier I and Tier II. After completing all the forms, I schedule the meetings, and I do the paperwork. I can run a few errands with [teachers]. If we have something we need to have knowledge about, I usually could find it. I also...I have a book that gives some interventions. If we need something done, we could pull the books and look at them but basically, you know, I do the paperwork. I try to help the teachers get what they need but I guess

I am the go between the parent and the teacher because we have to be with them [parents] all the way.

Ann: Response to intervention would be the different ways that I accommodate that student or try to help the student differently than what they are doing in the normal classroom. It is that I meet with him several times weekly on this skill and then at least once or twice a week I am accessing that [skill] to get some data as to whether the responses is working or not then, I am following up with the student assistants team and getting some more ideas and ways of helping him.

Identification Model: RTI is viewed as an identification model with the sole purpose of identifying students needing special education services. Here, RTI is seen as replacing the IQ discrepancy model as a method of identification. Emphasis is on its identification properties with RTI seen as merely another tool for student identification. The special education teacher who participated in this study viewed RTI as an identification tool.

Michelle: And I had seen within that circle of time the children that are placed are truly learning disabled, whereas when they were placed before a lot of times it was behavior problems that made them be placed or, um, maybe they were ADD and the teacher didn't know how to deal with them that kind of thing in the classroom. Here, I think since we have implemented RTI and we really truly work through the process; the children that are placed in the Special Ed. Program truly have a learning disability. They truly have a learning disability or medical

handicap. They have an emotional disability and we have all of the documentation to prove that that is actually what's wrong with that child rather than just, oh well, Ms. Jones doesn't know how to deal with this child in the classroom so let's just put him in the Special Ed. class. Does that make sense?

Each participant emphasized different components of RTI based on what they perceived were the goals of RTI implementation at their schools. The difference in perceptions were not across schools therefore the only logical explanation is the differences were based on individual teaching ideologies and what each individual believes is his or her role as an educator. However, it should be noted that educators who were new in the field emphasized its referral nature of RTI, administrators and veteran teachers emphasized the instructional and preventative qualities of RTI. The SAT chairs and the two teachers who described RTI more accurately emphasized the process of RTI and the interventionists emphasized the use of intensive interventions as a goal of RTI. Below is a summary of the findings categorized by the research questions.

Summary of Responses to Research Questions

What are administrators and teachers' understanding of RTI and how RTI is being implemented in their classrooms?

Some of the participants knew how RTI was being implemented at their schools, notably the participants who had been teaching at those schools for a longer period or those who had worked in the district for a long time. New faculty had limited knowledge of RTI. Some confessed to not having heard of RTI until they started working for the

district. For these teachers, this meant that many teacher education institutions were still not incorporating information about RTI in their courses and those that were, simply mentioned RTI in passing. Variations in descriptions of RTI were noted. The participants differed in their description of RTI including what they perceived as the goals for RTI implementation.

Many of the participants associated RTI with the meeting of student needs. This is one of the many reasons for RTI implementation. Participants stated what they did to try to meet student needs. They included the use of small-group instruction, differentiated instruction, classroom management strategies, assessment and progress monitoring.

Participants also talked about improving their practice as an important aspect of RTI implementation. Some participants indicated how their instructional practices had changed because of implementing RTI and that they were now more conscious of how they taught. That they had ceased looking at poor performance, or simply a student weakness, but looked at how to change instruction for a more positive student outcome.

Surprisingly, participants did not discuss the use of evidence-based practices. One participant stated that RTI was a scientific method of improving teaching practice though there was no direct link to the use of evidence-based practices. The use of evidence-based practices is a vital tenet of RTI and all those implementing RTI should be able to articulate this important feature. In fact, in education today, the use of scientifically validated instructional strategies and practices are key to effective teaching. Both schools were currently using Everyday Math and Hundred Book Challenge as their math and

reading core curricula. Both core curricula were selected by the school district. The district also selected interventions for Tier II and Tier III. However, the SAT teams were tasked with assessing individual students needs and providing appropriate interventions based on needs.

Furthermore, the RTI processes seemed to be described differently in each school. One of the noted concerns, though, this was not mentioned by participants, was with the process of student identification and referral. It was noted that there was a difference when it came to the referral process and two teachers stated that they did not even know their first line of contact. The assistant principal and SAT co-chair, Bob, used the following description of the process:

In our district, it starts, typically it starts with, the teacher getting in touch with the parent, letting them know of the concerns that they are having. Whether it's behavior or academic, you know either way. From there, they can come to either myself or Miss Louise our SAT team coach here and we can walk them through the process, as far as, what type of documentation that we need. We have a software program called Enrich in our district where we keep track of the documentation. And then from there we will have...or try to schedule an initial meeting with the parents, discuss the concerns that the teacher has. We'll have someone go in and do, at least, one hopefully, preferably two observations on the child in the areas that, where the concern is and we'll report all those things to the parent at that initial meeting.

Normally from there, we will have an intervention. The team will, with the parents of course, figure out what's going to be the... if there are multiple areas of concern we will try to pick the one that's, the most pressing or the one that affects other areas the most and we'll come up with an intervention to try and we'll give it... you hope to give it at least about three weeks of consistent intervention time plus opportunities to assess to see how that intervention is going and then we will have a follow up meeting.

Normally, the follow up meeting is three to four weeks after the initial meeting with the parents. We'll go over the results of the intervention and it could be that the decision is, let's continue with that intervention because progress is being made or it could be a decision of, do we need to look at evaluating this student academically or behaviorally because there wasn't enough progress or there was no progress made? There is more paper work involved, of course, for the documentation purpose. But we will gather up all the documentation, we will submit it to student services for their approval if it's a case where we need to evaluate or assess the student on to see if there is a specific learning disability, [then we evaluate].

Bob's description of the RTI process was quite detailed. When compared to the referral process described for Hodges Elementary, notable differences were present. Julie described the RTI process at Hodges as follows;

It kind of looks like the teacher gives assessments such as the DOMINEE, or whatever the math assessment, whatever we use we have several measures to assess children, and the teachers determine who needs substantial intervention... and they are meeting with those students almost every day because, they have to move them. They are two or three grade levels below. And they might just need additional intervention... and they will meet with those [students] a couple of times a week and the students that are on grade level, they may not even meet with them this week because they are performing [well].

We use a Daily Five management system and they have assignments they know that they have to do when the teachers conference with students. And the rest of the students have choices when they go [about class] and they know what they are supposed to be doing and most of those are on grade level or above [hence] don't need a whole lot of teacher direction. But our students that need some substantial intervention go to interventionists. We make sure that they [interventionists] have measures in place that if it didn't work... say, for example, Everyday Math or whatever we are doing in the classroom, they don't need to keep doing that over and over in intervention... that we have other measures of instruction in the interventionists... or Reading Recovery. We have a lot of the interventionists out there to work with our students, to help our teachers with those that need substantial interventions so that we can try to get them at least to... grade level.

Our goal, of course, is grade level mastery. And then after all the interventions we have provided, if our interventions aren't working then we refer to the SAT team to go for further testing.

Such variations even within a district may impact fidelity of implementation. Further differences can be seen in the observational data shown in Appendix S.

What do teachers and administrators perceive as the role of school culture in the implementation of RTI in their school?

Variations were noted in the description of school culture with many participants describing the school demographics instead. With further redirection and definition of school culture, many participants described collaboration and teamwork as being important to implementation efforts. The administrators were able to describe their school philosophies and connect those in with implementation efforts.

Both schools served different student demographics that seemed to impact their culture. For example, Barnes, which had a much higher Hispanic population with a much higher population of students coming from lower socio-economic households, had a more parent-oriented environment. They focused mainly on meeting students' physical needs before academic needs. Faculty believed that parental involvement was key to student success. Parent programs such as adult English as a Second Language classes were noted as a highlight of their cultural practices. Culturally, there seemed to be emphasis on providing students with physical needs such as food and clothing, or providing students with a safe environment.

On the other hand, Hodges elementary was lauded by the principal as being one of the few schools in the district that provided excellent interventions that met students' needs. She talked about how many students were transferring into their school because they heard about the good programs they had for struggling students. During focus group interviews, participants talked about various professional developments they had attended and some of their instructional practices that were geared towards meeting student needs. Hodges had several displays of student work inside classrooms as well as out in the hallways. The participants from this school prided themselves with the fact that many other schools had visited their school to observe and learn about how they were implementing RTI.

These differences in cultural practices, none necessarily better than the other, may have influenced implementation of RTI. The academically-oriented school which emphasized instructional practices and student outcomes put more emphasis on perfecting implementation efforts of RTI than the school that was more socially oriented which, faced social challenges and was obligated to meet student needs beyond academics.

What do teachers and administrators report as their personal pedagogical beliefs that influence how they implement RTI?

Surprisingly, this seemed to be the most difficult question to get detailed responses. When asked about teaching philosophies, there seemed to be a universal response of "I believe all children can learn". It was difficult to probe further response

from this ideology thus, making it difficult to identify individual ideologies. This difficulty in distinguishing ideologies also made it difficult to identify whether implementation was affected. However, while responding to other questions about classroom instruction, assessment, progress monitoring etc., some of their practices revealed strong pedagogical beliefs. Some of the participants demonstrated routinely established patterns while others showed what they preferred but had room for flexibility. From the administrators' perspective, teachers who allowed room for flexibility tended to adapt well to change, including the introduction of new programs or school-wide reforms such as RTI. All the participants stated that they were on board with the implementation of RTI at their schools. No one said he or she was not for the core curricula in place or was against the interventions used with struggling learners. Participants emphasized collaboration and being team players in the overall implementation of RTI at their schools.

However, the principal at Hodges noted that some veteran teachers were resistant to change and sometimes refused to implement novel practices. She said it was difficult to work with such individuals because not only were they resistant to change, but they also tried to influence other faculty members to resist using novel methods in their classrooms.

What do teachers and administrators report as basic knowledge that they need to have to implement RTI in their schools?

Many of the participants, who had been in the education system for more than 10 years, indicated that they learned about RTI at the workplace. Some who had transferred

from other school districts indicated that they learned about RTI at Latter County School District. The participants who were coming in straight from college stated that they had heard about RTI but knew very little about how it would be implemented in school.

Basic knowledge of RTI and how it was supposed to be implemented seemed important to the participants. It was important to the participants that all new faculty members were informed about how RTI was to be implemented. However, it was also noted that the newer faculty members not only had limited knowledge of RTI coming from college, but having been at the schools for at least one semester, were still unaware of who formed the multidisciplinary team or even their role in the multidisciplinary team. They seemed to refer to a manual that had a list of names of whom to refer struggling students. The most recent professional development at these schools had to do with the use of Enrich, a computer-based program that the district implemented that would help with the management of the RTI process. This program was built with a management system that would help practitioner record all stages of the RTI process including meetings, team decisions, student assessment and evaluations, interventions, student progress, and student movement within the Tiers. However, being that some schools had new faculty, training on how to implement RTI needed to precede the use of this computer-based program.

The participants who did not know much about RTI talked about the importance of having a school designee who would provide information about how to assist struggling students and also the process of referring struggling learners. The participants did not specify aspects of RTI that would be considered basic knowledge of RTI.

What are some other school related factors that teachers and administrators report as influencing how they implement RTI?

Several factors came up as affecting implementation efforts. These included class sizes, scheduling, time, limited personnel, fidelity of implementation, funding, and support. Some of these areas of concern were noted as barriers to implementation efforts. Proponents of RTI recommend small-group instruction especially when attending to struggling students (Bender & Shores, 2007a, 2007b; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Fuchs, Fuchs & Compton, 2004; Fuchs et al., 2003; McNamara & Hollinger, 2003). Some participants indicated the desire to give small-group instruction but by virtue of the number of students in their classes, it was difficult to provide small-group instruction to struggling learners. However, the participant who was observed did use the Daily Five small-group rotation in her class and was able to provide small-group instruction and individual conferencing.

Administrators further described time and scheduling as a challenge, especially when planning Tier II and Tier III interventions. All students were still required to attend core classes and squeezing time in the day to incorporate the needed interventions for struggling learners seemed a daunting feat for administrators. In line with this was the need for additional personnel. It was noted that some of the interventionists were previously teacher assistants. Some may argue that if a student is struggling with academic skills then all the more reason for such a student to receive interventions from a trained professional knowledgeable in addressing student skill deficits and helping them master grade level skills. One administrator argued that those teacher assistants were

good with children, though that did not translate to having the ability to teach academic skills. Nevertheless, they did show student improvement in PASS testing, though one would have further argued that a qualified professional may have made a much more significant gain in student outcome. This argument, however, does not take away from the need for personnel to provide interventions to struggling students, but it directly brings in the question of fidelity of implementation.

Fidelity of implementation concerns came up when discussing teacher knowledge of RTI. Participants felt that with limited knowledge of RTI, they would not be able to implement RTI effectively. The department of student services provided several trainings on RTI during the initial implementation, however training now was limited to anything new that was being initiated. For example, in the summer of 2012, faculty received training on how to use Enrich for student referrals, documentation of evaluation and team decisions, and progress monitoring. However, new faculty, who also received this training, knew how to use the program without necessarily understanding what RTI was, including its features and the process as a whole. Such piece meal information may result in lack of fidelity when it comes to implementation of RTI.

Funding and support did not come up as issues of concern. Many participants indicated that they felt supported by their administrators and also had support from colleagues. There was always someone to bounce ideas off of and also share some of the strategies that worked in the classroom. Though the scope of this research was limited to Tier I instruction, participants did not mention limited funding even for Tier II or Tier III either.

Summary of Findings

Participants varied in their responses to each question - each bringing individual ideologies about RTI implementation at their school and adding personal experiences of how RTI looked like in their classrooms. Many of the RTI components at these two schools were put in place as was required. However, from the general educators stand point, there still was a lot to learn about the implementation of RTI. The variation, not only between the schools in the same district, but also within a single school, may be interpreted as preventing effective implementation of RTI although perhaps this was unbeknown to the participants. With such variation, one could claim evidence of lack of fidelity because not all stakeholders knew how RTI should be implemented and not all of them were following the basic guidelines set by the district as the proper procedure for assisting struggling learners.

Culturally, both schools varied in their norms. Though the teachers were able to share their beliefs, the subtle differences between their explanations indicated that they did not have a strong, solid school culture. Schools that have well-developed cultural norms periodically share their beliefs and once their beliefs become a fabric of their daily operations, all faculty and staff are able to state what their school culture is. Many of the participants talked about similar cultural norms but nothing distinct enough to guarantee what would be considered a school culture. The cultural norms from each school were deduced from some of their practices. For example, in a culture where the faculty and staff collectively meet the needs of the students, a comprehensive school-wide reform such as RTI that targeted individual needs would fit like a glove. The educators and

support staff are already used to looking out for their children. Including the meeting of student needs as an essential component of a reform would be an easy aspect of the reform to be adopted by the school since that is an important part of their school philosophy.

Continued need for professional development was evident, especially for schools with new teachers. Given that RTI has several components that need to be executed at the same time, providing professional development in some components and leaving out others makes effective implementation a daunting feat. For RTI to be implemented in its entirety, an all-encompassing professional development program should be provided on a regular basis. Effective training is necessary for effective implementation. For example the most recent training that the teachers had received was on the use of Enrich, a computer-based data-management system. However, new faculty would still need to be enlightened on the basic tenets of RTI.

Finally, although personal ideologies can impact practice, this was not evident in any of the participants in this study. Administrators revealed some of their challenges with faculty who did not do well with change. One administrator stated how she had to let a faculty member go for refusing to implement a new program, which may offer an explanation why everyone interviewed had positive views about RTI. Professionals who are resistant to change make it difficult to effectively implement a system-wide change. Education is a continuously evolving field with researchers, policy makers, and educators constantly trying to perfect the art of teaching and knowledge acquisition. Educators should be willing to accept change as long as there is evidence to back its effectiveness.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was conducted in an effort to investigate educators' perspectives on the role of school culture, teacher belief and program knowledge on implementation of response to intervention (RTI). RTI is a multi-tiered framework for delivering intervention to students who continue to demonstrate low performance and inadequate response to high quality research-based instruction (National Association of State Directors of Special Education [NASDE], 2006; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

For this research, the majority of participants interviewed were general education teachers who provide Tier I instruction and administrators who help facilitate implementation efforts at this stage of service delivery. Additional participants included interventionists and special education teachers who provided supplemental interventions to struggling students in Tier I. The participants in this study candidly shared their experiences implementing RTI at their schools. Administrators shared their roles in the RTI process, their support as well as their contribution in the process as a whole. The teachers and interventionists also shared their implementation efforts including their roles in the RTI process. When summarizing the research findings, the overall responses for the research questions, the theories that guided this study, and how the theories were used to analyze participants' perspectives will be addressed.

Five research questions were developed at the beginning of this research. These overarching research questions were further divided into several questions that were used during participant interviews. Observations and document review were also guided by the research questions. Once data was collected, codes and themes were developed based on participants' responses, observations and information within documents.

Most of the findings were consistent with available literature on RTI. However, some new information was discovered based on participant responses and observation of stakeholders' implementation of RTI. In the following summary and discussion section, the research findings will be tied in with literature to identify commonalities and additional emerging information.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

Five essential questions formed the basis for investigation in this study. These questions addressed areas of (a) practitioners' understanding of RTI, (b) the participants' perception of the importance of school culture on implementation of RTI, (c) how individual beliefs shaped educators' practice, (d) the participants' perception of the importance of program knowledge through professional development, and (e) the participants' perception of other school related factors that affect implementation of RTI.

Prewett, et al., (2012) recommends that practitioners give particular attention to the contextual and cultural features of RTI before implementing the essential components. By contextual factors these researchers meant ensuring continuous RTI-focused professional development, administrator led implementation, district level

support, staff role redefinition, and staff acceptance of RTI (Prewett, et al., 2012). These same factors were consistent with the research findings. Most of the participants cited professional development, administrative support and teacher buy-in as central to implementation efforts. When addressing the cultural features, participants cited collaboration, child-centered instruction, progress monitoring, community and parental involvement as key to their cultural norms. As far as individual beliefs, participants cited reshaping of ideologies as important. Administrators also stated the need to select individuals who conformed to the general beliefs of the school. Furthermore, professional development was cited as important for effective implementation though there were varied perspectives in this regard. This next section is a discussion of contextual and cultural features as analyzed from the research findings. The section is divided into five broad categories based on the five research questions, and is tied into the current literature on the same issue and the overarching theory used for the analysis.

Practitioners' understanding of RTI

Variability was noted during participants' descriptions of RTI. Some participants gave an almost textbook description of RTI while others were not quite sure how to describe or define RTI. RTI has been implemented in this school district for over 10 years. Administrators and teachers who had worked for this district for more than seven years were able to describe RTI appropriately, giving detail description of how it was implemented at their schools. The newer faculty members were not as familiar with the RTI initiative and were still trying to understand the process as a whole. Because of various individual ideologies, and how they perceived the role and goal of RTI at their

school, different participants gave particular aspects of RTI more prominence than others. This led to the development of six perception models of RTI which included (a) preventative model, (b), referral model, (c) instructional model, (d) intervention model, (e) process model, and (f) identification model. These models further illustrate how educators interpret educational reforms based on the parts of the reform that speak to their individual ideologies. Some of the interpretations of educational reforms may also vary depending on specific disciplines. For example special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators might each have different perspectives of a single educational reform and implement the reform differently based on their individual understandings. In this study: the administrators saw RTI as a means to reduce over-identification of students in special education; veteran teachers saw it as an improvement on their instructional practice; new teachers saw it as a means to refer struggling students to special education; interventionists felt it was a means to provide intensive intervention to struggling students; and the special education teacher felt it was a method that replaced the IQ discrepancy model. These findings are similar to studies by other researchers (Gersten & Dimino, 2006; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2002; Werts, Lambert, & Carpenter, 2009) who have also noted a lack of uniformity concerning the process, purpose and structure of the RTI models hence, not only causing variations in the implementation of RTI between schools in the district, but also within a particular school. However, within those variations common aspects of the RTI features were evident in the participants' descriptions of RTI.

The findings from this study further support the general variability in the understanding of RTI and its implementation. Not only do these practitioners have a varied view of RTI implementation and its overall goal at their school, researchers also have varied views of RTI. Some view RTI as an instructional model (Mellard et al., 2004; Mellard & Johnson, 2008; Kavale et al., 2008; Kovaleski & Glew, 2006) while to others it is viewed as an identification model (Hollenbeck, Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

Research suggests that general education teachers seem to have little to no knowledge of the implementation of RTI upon employment (Hougen, 2008; McCombes-Tolis & Spear-Swerling, 2011; Schwartz, et al., 2009). The two new faculty members indicated that they had only heard about RTI briefly in college. They, too, were the least informed about RTI not knowing the RTI process or their roles. Other participants stated that they heard about RTI for the first time in this school district.

Understanding a system-wide initiative is important for effective implementation. For example, out of the eight essential components of RTI, data-based decision-making, progress monitoring, universal screening and fidelity of implementation were mentioned by different participants at different times. Some did mention the fact that RTI was multi-tiered in structure. Many of the participants described about three components at a time during interviews, though none mentioned the use of evidence-based interventions or research-based core curriculum. One possible explanation would be that teachers were not privy to the selection of curricula, both core curriculum and supplemental curriculum, hence, could not adequately state whether they were research-based. The administrators

and SAT chairs were more articulate in their description of RTI and its components while describing the RTI implementation at their schools. Practitioners with knowledge of RTI should know a majority, if not all of the essential components of RTI. Knowing the basic tenets of RTI and the process of implementing RTI is essential for pre-service teachers, especially when they are expected to work in schools that are already implementing RTI. More important is the school districts provision of training for newly hired educators. District officials should not presume that new employees have the necessary knowledge to implement RTI.

Participants' perceptions of the importance of school culture to RTI implementation

School culture is cited as one of the factors that influence the implementation of educational reforms (Brown, 2004; Goldring, 2002; Peterson & Deal, 1998). Cultural theory supports the notion that there are certain cultural norms and values groups of people share (Bryk, Lee & Holland, 1993; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). These norms are things they consider important to the group. The cultural norms can be developed as a group or can be set in place by the leader of the group. Once these valuable ideologies have been set in place, group members abide by these norms and hold them dear because these norms distinguish them from other groups. This uniqueness of the group, guided by the set of principles collectively developed or individually designed for the group, guide the group in daily activities including delineating roles and duties, and developing accountability measures. This study went further than simply describing the importance of school culture to describing specific aspects of school culture that were important to these two schools and that supported implementation of RTI. Though many participants

described school demographics when asked to describe their school culture, they were still able to describe school values and norms they considered important to them. Many of the practices they mentioned were interpreted to form their school norms and could have easily influenced how they implemented the core curriculum prescribed by the district.

The ‘whole school’ approach to this reform seemed to be important to the participants and they seemed eager to make the process work. This ‘whole school’ element is reflected in the following themes that emerged from the interviews. A majority of the participants emphasized *collaboration, teamwork and networking* as a central cultural norm of their school. Many were able to talk about collaboration as a key factor in implementation of their programs. This finding supports Brown’s (2004) description of important ingredients that form school culture. One of those ingredients is close supportive relationships, and collaboration between staff and faculty is an indication of supportive relationships.

Collaborative activities result in added value by generating multiple solutions to complex problems and by providing opportunities to learn from others as school professionals express and share expertise (McLesky & Waldren, 2010). Sandra shared how she helped new teachers. When these endeavors are part of a school change initiative, research has revealed that such a collaborative culture or community lead to higher levels of trust and respect among colleagues, improved professional satisfaction, improved instructional practice, better outcomes for all students and school change that is maintained over time (Dufour et al., 2006; Friend & Cook, 2007; Joyce & Showers,

1995, 2002; McLeskey Waldron, So, Swanson, & Loveland, 2001; Waldron & McLeskey, 1998, 2002). Such collaborative teams become essential especially when new faculty members, who may not know what step to take, have access to a team that can offer suggestions or strategies. Such noble efforts would assist new staff especially when some student behaviors may be typical of students within a developmental age range. Teachers who have not been in the field for a long time may not identify what a typical behavior is or what is developmentally appropriate for certain grades or age groups. Hence, without this sharing of expertise, many would not know where to begin. Summer, a new teacher at Barnes, shared how she felt that the SAT chair at Barnes and other teacher leaders had helped her in the classroom and would continue to help her understand RTI even though she had not yet identified a student who needed to go through the referral process. It is important that all stakeholders understand the intricate details of the workings of the RTI process.

Some participants also shared how they worked collaboratively with the interventionist to ensure coherence between what was taught in class and the intervention the student received. Such an instructional coherence has been seen to demonstrate stronger student outcomes (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth & Bryk, 2001). Hence, a clear articulation of how supplemental instruction complements and reinforces what is being taught in the classroom is necessary (Hill, King, Lemons, &Partanen, 2012). The interventionists at Hodges described how they worked with classroom teachers to ensure they were providing interventions that were in line with what the students were doing in the classroom. However, the multidisciplinary team had to ensure that the student was not

always receiving the same intervention so that if the intervention he was receiving in the classroom was not working, then the interventionist would have to use a different program or intervention.

All stakeholders worked together to ensure student success. Collaborative efforts began in the school leadership team, included grade level teams, and lead to collaboration between teachers and support staff. Teaming is essential for positive student outcomes (Nellis, 2012). From the mannerism and behaviors of participants during focus group interviews, collegiality and cooperation seemed evident. The educators in the focus group seemed to speak with one voice sharing similar ideas and having similar opinions. Such cooperative efforts when instilled within a school culture would foster effective implementation efforts of school reforms especially when the reform requires collaboration and effective communication such as is required for the RTI initiative.

Furthermore, participants cited this collaborative effort as not being limited to the educating staff but included the parents and community. Each school indicated that there was *community involvement* in many of the school reform initiatives. These efforts to involve the community were part of the school's fabric. More importantly, they were an integral part of Barnes' school culture. Such evidence further enhanced the importance of school culture as playing a central role in school-wide reform efforts. Comprehensive school reforms require a *collective collaborative effort* that involves parents and the community (Datnow & Castellano, 2001; Datnow et al., 2005; Desimone, 2000; Desimone, 2002; Kirby, Berends, & Naftel, 2001; Smith, et al., 1997; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). Schools that already have such a system built into its culture find it

easier to implement RTI. RTI involves team efforts and an important member of that team is the parent. A school that involves parents in various school activities will find it easier to involve parents in team decision-making for struggling children.

Even though RTI is a general education initiative and the special education department did not want to seem to 'interfere' with the process, staying too far out of the way may result in neglect of some of the important procedural requirements for implementation. It is not only paramount that initiators provide guidance, but continued support and supervision might be necessary.

In both schools, participants shared their perceptions of administrative and district support when it came to the students' education. In both schools, the principal or assistant principal and the SAT chairs shared the lead role in the RTI process. They called for and led the team meetings. The participants kept making reference to what their principals expected of them showing that the principals took the lead role in ensuring the struggling student's needs were met and in setting the tone for school-wide expectations of meeting needs of struggling learners. The principals were active supporters of everything that was being done for the students. They not only advocated for the students, but also advocated for the teachers and interventionist. They looked for resources that would help the teachers become effective in their classrooms.

Dorothy, the director of student services also indicated that she provided necessary support to principals. She said she preferred that principals take the lead role in the RTI initiative because RTI is a general education initiative and not a special education

initiative. She assisted with funding, personnel and various other resources where necessary. This finding further supports Brown's (2004) description of necessary ingredient for a productive school culture, which is leadership that encourages and supports trust. Both school level and district level leadership support the RTI initiative and such a culture encourages effective implementation of school reforms.

Perceived importance of individual beliefs on RTI implementation

The most influential individual in the RTI process is the principal or the one leading the RTI process. A critical role of the principal and other leaders in CSR efforts is to ensure that the focus of change efforts stays on building school capacity to address student needs (Waldron & McLenskey, 2010). Especially important is the leadership element that must work with the existing staff culture to help establish a climate that facilitates change in staff's perceptions of roles and responsibilities (Prewett et al., 2012). Following the conflict theory, if there exists a conflict between the views of the leadership team and the staff, then it would be difficult to establish a climate of change. It is therefore important to develop a school-wide philosophy that is not in conflict with individual beliefs. Better yet, it is important to select members on your team who either have similar cultural beliefs as that of the school or those who will comply with the school-wide philosophy of student academic and behavioral success.

Both principals highlighted the importance of selecting new teachers who would support their agenda of meeting student needs through implementation of RTI. The principal at Hodges Elementary further stated that she had RTI questions built into the interview questions. She wanted to know how much knowledge the interviewing

candidates had about RTI or, the knowledge of specific components of RTI. She was keen on how a teacher candidate would remediate instruction for struggling students and whether the teacher monitored student progress and used data to drive instruction. The principal at Barnes did not have direct RTI question and she justified this by stating that they had a great support system that new teachers would be given direction as soon as they joined the faculty at the school.

Even though both administrators had different approaches to ensuring their new faculty fit their expectations and would be able to implement RTI, they both were able to select candidates that would conform to their cultural values and school-wide philosophy. Teacher candidates with contrasting beliefs or ideologies, who did not support their school culture, were not selected for positions at their schools. Hence, school culture is still very important in the implementation of school-wide reform effort even as far as selecting faculty with a specific ideology that support the implementation of the school reform at the time of their interviews.

It is not always that new hires have similar beliefs as that of the school. It might be necessary to *reshape individual ideologies* to conform to the norms or values of the school. Fullan (1999, 2007) describes how partnership develops in schools that have experienced successful implementation of school improvement efforts and suggests that rather than restructuring a school, there needs to be a “re-culturing” of the school. To change the culture of a school so that it becomes a more inclusive school, educators must question their individual beliefs about teaching and learning for students who struggle to

learn, and engage in a collaborative change process that results in new values, beliefs, norms, and preferred behaviors (Fullan, 2007; McLeskey & Waldron, 2002, 2006).

Pre-service teachers develop individual philosophies and personal beliefs based on what they have learned in college or sometimes they are shaped by the beliefs of their college professors (McCombes-Tolis & Spear-Swelings, 2011). Coming into the workforce with well-formed teaching philosophies is an excellent way to be able to decide how teachers intend to set up their classrooms, structure their instruction, assist students, and develop professional relationships with their colleagues.

Sometimes, those individual beliefs may need to be reformed especially if, after working for several years, teachers are resistant to change. It takes a strong, well-developed school culture to be able to reshape individual cultures, more importantly a strong leader. RTI, like any other school-wide initiatives, requires a cultural shift. The greatest of this shift is from the previous expectation that struggling students are the responsibility of special education teachers, to the general education teacher being actively involved in meeting the needs of struggling learners. In actuality, meeting the needs of all students is the responsibility of all educators within a school building with the guidance and support of the leadership team. This school district had changed its philosophy and all practitioners were expected to meet the needs of the struggling learner. Teachers were encouraged to have high expectations for students' outcomes and also set high expectations for their instructional practices. When asked to describe their role, many participants emphasized how they did everything they could to meet students' needs in the classroom. At this district, RTI is a general education initiative with general

educators supposedly taking the initiative to meet all students' needs while the RTI process is lead by the principal and SAT chair who, in most schools, are not special education teachers. Special education and school psychologist expertise is sought when a student is suspected of having a learning disability. Leadership of the RTI process, including many of the decisions, is left to the principal and SAT chair. That is why the principal, with the help of the SAT chair, should provide effective leadership.

As mentioned above, school culture plays a central role in guiding teachers on what is expected of them regardless of their individual cultures. However, the school culture should be deemed strong enough or important enough to become the cultural voice of the school superseding individual cultures. For cultural shift to take effect in a school, the overarching school culture has to be meaningful enough for individual members to see its worth and hopefully adopt it. If for some reason the school culture and individual culture are in conflict, then individuals' resistance begins to be evident and individual cultures will tend to prevail with teachers working independently in their classrooms. The principal at Hodges described a teacher who was set in her ways and refused to implement novel programs. She stated how difficult it was to work with such teachers. She described a situation where she had to let a teacher go because she was adamant and refused to comply with new instructional methods. It was not specified whether the situation was specific to RTI implementation but it is important to note that in as much as individual ideologies are important, if they are different from the school norm, a change of the beliefs may be eminent. This change can only be possible if the individual considers the school norm valuable.

Within a given school district, RTI involves multiple teachers, interventionists, administrators, levels of services, programs, assessments, decision rules, and expectations to decision rules- and that is before students, their parents and multiple campuses consideration (Hill, King, Lemons, &Partanen, 2012). All these individuals work with students, with several of the members working with the same student at any given time. It is not only imperative that their roles and responsibilities are clearly spelled out, but also that the progress, efforts, and outcomes at each stage are clearly communicated with and among each other.

Distributed leadership is indispensable in school change efforts that address the progress of effective inclusive schools (Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). When these endeavors are undertaken, no single individual has the comprehensive range of knowledge or skills regarding general and special education to provide leadership for every aspect of school change (McLeskey & Waldron, 2002). Therefore, collective effort and responsibility is necessary and can effect school change. The theory of structural-functionalism supports the notion that collective individual efforts with varied roles and responsibilities function to influence the whole (Kingsbury & Scanzoni, 1993). To perform its function in an optimal fashion, that is, increase its degree of functionality, the [unit] must have a particular kind of structure (Kingsbury & Scanzoni, 1993). Structure is the arrangement of the “roles of which a social system [such as a school] is composed of” (McIntyre, 1996, p. 60).

McIntyre describes four fundamental properties of a social system. First, social systems have differentiated or specialized kinds of roles. These can be seen in the

different roles of the stakeholders or multidisciplinary team members. Each stakeholder is tasked with a specific role and reports on his/ her role during team meetings. Many of the general education teachers interviewed saw their role as providing necessary intervention in the classroom and referring student to SAT team when all instructional avenues had been explored. Administrators and SAT chairs saw their roles as facilitators in the RTI process with specific roles of analyzing data, suggesting interventions and facilitating team meetings.

A second property of social systems is that roles of the members are organized around shared values and norms. These norms and values establish the individual rights and obligations to one another and to the society as a whole (McIntyre, 1996). This is seen in the rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders to themselves, to the student, and the rest of the team members. Collaboration had been cited as evidence of responsibilities to one another and individualizing instruction as responsibility to students. Responsibility to themselves can be seen in what they do to ensure they improve their practice. Participants such as Sandra, Grace, and John shared how they valued professional development especially those that helped them become better teachers.

Thirdly, McIntyre states that another important property of a social system is that it is “boundary-maintaining” (McIntyre, 1966, p. 59). This is seen in the collaborative and teaming nature of all faculty and staff of a school. Participants at Hodges described the extra effort in ensuring all teachers, especially new faculty members, were aware of the curriculum they used and were using them in their classroom. Sandra described how

she mentored a teacher who taught third grade. She assisted this teacher with the Hundred Book Challenge curriculum, which they used for reading. She also described other lead teachers working with newly hired faculty to show them the ropes and how things are done at Hodges Elementary. Furthermore, in support of the boundary-maintaining nature of social systems, many participants from Hodges emphasized the fact that they were a model RTI school and that they had been observed by not only other school within their district, but also other schools sent to them via the South Carolina State Department of Education. Such pride in their school was binding and something they wanted and intended to maintain.

Finally, the social system has a tendency toward equilibrium, a built in mechanism that seems to hold it in a steady state “either a static or moving stability over a period of time” (McIntyre, 1966, p. 59). This can be seen in each school’s cultural norms that can either be static for a period of time or change based on various circumstances such as change in leadership. Hodges had maintained its current leadership for over 11 years. They seemed to have maintained equilibrium, eloquently stating their school norms, their roles and responsibility, and describing their RTI model effectively. Barnes, on the other hand, had just experienced a change in leadership. Even though the SAT chair and other stakeholders had worked in that school for a while, a change in leadership often brings with it expected changes in daily operations. Therefore, until the new principal stated her expectations or set the tone for the rest of the school to follow, the school would remain in a state of disequilibrium.

In summary, based on structural-functionalism theory, the whole school is considered successful when all individual parts- teachers, students, support staff, leaders and community, work together for its success. The effective implementation of RTI can be possible when the individual stakeholders, with the right attitude and ideology, work together for the benefit of the group.

Participants' perceptions of what is needed to implement RTI

Participants generally discussed how they needed to be prepared when it came to implementation without really being specific about the knowledge they needed to have to participate in the RTI process. The information that was specific to “what” was needed to implement RTI, tended to focus on procedural protocol such as, who the contact person was for referral, or how to give small-group instruction to struggling learners.

Participants appeared to need to make sure they were doing their part, however, many did not appear to know all of the elements that were necessary for a complete and effective school implementation of RTI. It is important that schools and/or districts implementing RTI set procedures in place to facilitate on-going relevant professional development (PD) to faculty and staff in order to sustain implementation efforts (Desimone, 2000; Slavin, 2004; Sullivan & Long, 2010; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000).

Though the participants were not specific in what they considered necessary knowledge required for implementation, they cited the need for the introduction of RTI during teacher preparation and continued PD as long as RTI was still being implemented in a school. When PD is not provided on a regular basis, there may be laxity in

implementation or even a complete abandonment of the program. These findings further support the research by Smith et al., (1997) who found that teachers were more satisfied with reform efforts when PD was provided not only with initial training but, as an ongoing process. When ongoing PD is not provided, practitioners tend to discard initiatives. For example, Hodges Elementary, which was a Reading First school, received funding and resources to be able to implement Reading First. During observations, a room full of Reading First material was seen though the materials were no longer in use.

Schools that claim to be implementing RTI may not be implementing it fully. Michelle, a special education teacher, talked about coming from a previous school that claimed to be implementing RTI but was truly not implementing it. She said the level of parental involvement and high-level data-driven decision-making that she saw at Hodges was a model of the RTI process, which was not present in her previous school. Many schools are implementing bits and pieces of RTI that fit their needs. Schools can only implement RTI fully when practitioners understand every component or feature of RTI. Hence, the need for appropriate training on all aspects of RTI is imminent.

Hougen (2008) asserts that pre-service teachers can benefit from the opportunity to apply RTI principles and techniques as part of their professional preparation. Summer and Natalie, who had only worked for two years in education, stated that there was some mention of RTI at their colleges but they truly did not get to understand it until they went to Barnes. They were still in the process of understanding the RTI model as a whole and its implementation process. This study supports McCombes-Tolis and Spear-Swelings,

(2011) study where they found that pre-service general education teachers had limited or no exposure to RTI.

All other participants had learned about RTI from this school district. These participants did indicate that what was learned in college was important but training at the workplace was more important. One participant stated that many programs, initiatives, and interventions are learned in college but if you went to a school that did not implement that program, you would not really know how to use it. Unlike the study conducted by Sullivan and Long (2010) where they found that newer staff had far more training on RTI than experienced staff, this study found that the more experienced staff were more knowledgeable in the implementation of RTI than the new staff because of district supported training.

Participants' perceptions of additional school factors that influence implementation

Developing a school-wide philosophy begins with building school capacity. School capacity refers to the infrastructure and resources available within a school to address student needs (Waldron & McLenskey, 2010). Capacity includes concrete and tangible elements such as finances, personnel, and scheduling as well as intangible elements such as climate and vision (Waldron & McLenskey, 2010). As was indicated by the participants, *personnel, scheduling, time as well as class size* seemed to be areas of concern when it came to RTI implementation. In the participating schools, all of these factors reflected concerns that were real and that affected the amount and quality of instructional support students were receiving. However, in the current literature the

factors that have been cited as having an impact on educational reform are: teacher buy-in, leadership, school culture, professional development and teacher knowledge, accountability mandates, teaching and learning, parent involvement, and funding and resources (Datnow & Castellano, 2001; Datnow et al., 2005; Desimone, 2000, 2002; Kirby, Berends, & Naftel, 2001; Smith, et al., 1997; Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000). The additional factors shared by the participants present new information on implementation of educational reform.

Hodges, for example, used everyone in the building to teach reading or provide some sort of intervention to struggling students. Even though this effort solved one of the capacity issues, not everyone in the building had the skills or training to teach struggling students. Struggling students needed instruction from highly trained reading and math specialists who had the knowledge to provide interventions with fidelity and ensure student success.

The RTI process involves many individuals, and schools need to develop effective data-management strategies to ensure sharing of information among stakeholders. The use of computer software to store student information including interventions used, progress on each intervention, and team decisions, is very important. At this school district, all stakeholders had access to Enrich, a computer-based data management software that was used to record meetings, document team decisions, document interventions and student progress. It also stored student evaluations by various specialists. Such data management instruments are important for education initiatives such as RTI which require effective documentation for decision making.

Secondly, schools have designated time for core instruction for all required subjects. Additional time to provide instruction would require that sometimes students be pulled out of core classes for supplemental instruction and skill building. Would this be a disservice to the otherwise already struggling students? Time needs to be built in so that students receiving interventions are still able to receive core instruction without missing vital information that all other students are learning. Many schools opt to provide interventions during electives. However, depriving struggling learners of these courses may contribute to their dislike of school, a place they would view as only promoting the passing of reading and math, subjects that they already have difficulty mastering. The participants' addition of this factor further supports Brown's (2004) indication that sufficient time for teachers and students to do their work well is important for a productive school and for effective implementation of reforms.

Furthermore, individualizing instruction is a challenge when student-teacher ratios are too high. With the challenging economic times, districts and schools have continued to cut down on support staff that would otherwise be needed to provide additional interventions. This translates to small groups not actually being small groups but a smaller group than the whole classroom. Being true to the RTI process would require being true to what its developers advocated. Hence, a small group should not be more than five students.

While notable differences were identified during the descriptions of RTI at each school, the RTI process in general seemed to be different. While one RTI process began with parental contact, and the other with universal screening, it is no wonder the rest of

the participants had variations in describing the process. To ensure fidelity with the RTI process, all stakeholders should not only know their responsibilities in the process but other stakeholders' responsibilities as well. All struggling students should be referred in the same manner even though they may receive different interventions based on their areas of need. Consistency is key to fidelity of implementation. Barnes was noted as a school that culturally focused on parental and community involvement with a priority of meeting students' physical needs before academic needs. Hodges, on the other hand, focused on academics and emphasized the instructional components of RTI. Would these cultural norms influence implementation efforts at each school? Despite the fact that the district provided measures to ensure fidelity such as RTI fidelity documents used for each Tier and an SAT checklist, variations between school and even within schools were evident. These variations may be attributed to not only school culture, but to individual ideologies, which shape individual perceptions of RTI.

Pressing on with RTI

Despite the various challenges the participants cited, they seemed to be in favor of continuing to implement RTI. The participants supported RTI implementation at their school because they said they had seen the benefits of it. Comprehensive School Reforms (CSR) refer to school improvement initiatives that engage all students and teachers in improvement efforts, rather than targeting needy individuals (Ross, Scott & Sibbald, 2012). CSR is multi-dimensional, normally changing instructional practice, reinforcing professional networks within and among schools, forging relationships with various agencies, and building parent capacity (Ross, Scott & Sibbald, 2012). Furthermore, the

emphasis on schools' accountability (NCLB, 2001) explicitly supports the use of rigorous scientifically based research for determining which educational programs are effective in raising student achievement (Eisenhart & Towne, 2003; Feuer, Towne, & Shavelson, 2002).

Many of the participants agreed that they would continue to find ways to improve on implementation efforts. However, there were contradictions when asked about the number of students referred. Some participants said there was a noted reduction in referral while others said it was about the same. Michelle, the special education teacher, said that she had seen a reduction in the number of students referred for special education services. She said when she first started working at Hodges 11 years ago, her caseload was much larger than it was at that moment. Sandra further said that the reduction in the number of children was because teachers were doing all they could do in the classroom to meet students' needs. However, the assistant principal at Barnes said the percentage of students in special education was about the same. He said the referrals were still higher at the lower grades as was the case using the discrepancy model. This finding supports two sets of research; the research by VanDerheyden, Witt and Gilbertson, (2007) that found that fewer children were evaluated for special education services, and the research by Dexter and Hughes, (2011) that found the overall rates of special education referrals to be fairly constant. It can be inferred that there are improvements in the referral process using the RTI process in terms of efficiency of the referral process, but the gains are not significant enough to say that RTI has made a substantial impact on the students with learning disabilities receiving special education services because the number of students

receiving special education services are more or less the same. The number of students referred for evaluation have reduced and most probably those referred will qualify for services unlike before when any struggling student would be referred for services even those who did not qualify for services. Nevertheless, administrators were seen as truly the stronger advocates of RTI because they said they had seen the benefits of implementing it. From such positive responses, it was evident that RTI continues to be a supported effort at the school level for ensuring success for all students with an intensive intervention strategy for struggling students.

The director of student services shared how she worked with other educators at the district level to support the initiative. Though her department initiated the RTI implementation, she left the lead role to general education teachers and administrators because it was a general education initiative. In working with the school principals she stated how her department provided interventionist for Tier II and also provided programs for intervention at these stages. This collaboration between the special education and general education departments toward the RTI implementation solidified their relationship and helped ensure that all students received a free and appropriate public education.

Conclusion and Implications

In this study, I looked at RTI from a qualitative perspective in an effort to understand personal and cultural influences to implementation and attempt to give voice to the practitioners. Listening to the practitioners in the field who actually implement RTI

programs is important especially when trying to analyze the successes and challenges they face on a daily basis. The current study added to the existing literature on the importance of school culture and its impact on implementation of school reforms. This study went further by providing specific examples of what the two schools under investigation deemed culturally significant. Furthermore, it showed how cultural differences between schools in the same district could affect implementation of the same program designed by the same district.

From the data collected in this study, it was evident that in as much as individual ideologies played a role in implementation efforts, the school culture had a much greater impact on implementation efforts. The school culture subsumed individual perspectives and provided the spirit of collaboration supporting the fundamental characteristic of an RTI process. Therefore, researchers and policy makers may consider addressing school culture to ensure successful implementation of system-wide changes. For example, because schools value different things, school culture will vary depending on what the school values as important. Therefore, programs that will be selected for implementation within an RTI system may be those that fit in with the values of the school. Similarly, PD selected for faculty and staff will emphasize what the school values and what they expect each educator to emphasize in the classroom setting.

Alternatively, successfully implementing all components of RTI, school-wide or district-wide with fidelity, might result in a cultural shift, especially when the implementation of RTI brings with it positive student outcomes. In this case, the RTI culture of using effective screening methods, evidence-based interventions and

instruction, monitoring student progress, and using data for team decisions would subsume both school and individual cultures creating a new school-wide cultural norm.

Leadership was also identified as playing a vital role in implementation efforts. Both district and school leadership drove the RTI mechanism. The school leaders acted as the lead team and the district personnel acted as the support team. The school principals and SAT chairs directed the cohesiveness of this comprehensive reform beginning with the analysis of student data, selection of appropriate interventions and interventionist, attempting to ensure uniformity in the RTI process, and communicating directly or indirectly how RTI was perceived and valued at their school. The value the leaders placed on RTI implementation was evident even in the selection of new faculty. In summary, the value the leaders put on RTI, directly affected how it was implemented at their school, either nurturing the RTI mission or diverting emphasis to other areas.

Program knowledge is essential especially for those tasked with the implementation of an educational reform. RTI is a general education initiative, but general education teachers seem to know very little about its purpose and goal. From the data, there seemed to be a mention of some components of RTI, with many not going beyond a description of RTI as a process for assisting struggling learners. Even with the mention of some of the components, such as progress monitoring, further probing proved a misunderstanding of the component. RTI cannot be effectively implemented unless all practitioners, especially those who are tasked with making decisions, understand it and can effectively articulate its purpose in the instruction of all children.

Furthermore, one of the essential components of RTI is fidelity of implementation, which is also important for effective implementation of all educational reforms. To ensure fidelity, the district not only developed a unique RTI model and provided a detailed description of it in their district website, but they also developed procedural fidelity documents for each Tier of the RTI model (See appendix N, O, and P for fidelity documents). The department of student services developed documents that were used prior to the referral process, during the referral process, and after student placement in special education if need be. The findings from this study show that schools that implement RTI, and have done so for a while, develop fidelity procedures to ensure that all the schools within a district are following similar procedures for student referral and identification for special education services. However, how schools choose to use these available documents might differ. For example, in detailed descriptions of the RTI process by the principals and SAT chairs, variability was evident especially at the pre-referral stage. Not all practitioners used universal screening to identify struggling learners to provide classroom interventions as early as possible. Some even skipped this crucial part of the RTI process and went straight to the referral stage. This action further complicated the procedural fidelity despite availability of documents to ensure procedural fidelity. Nevertheless, having those vital fidelity documents are a first step in ensuring effectiveness of RTI implementation.

Implementing innovative programs, interventions and strategies continue to be a challenge for practitioners because different schools value different things. Until the interventions reach the level of what the schools value, their usability cannot be seen as

important and teachers continue to struggle with implementation issues. The intervention can be documented as effective by researchers but when effectiveness is not evident in practice those interventions lose credibility. Effective implementation of reform efforts will occur when the reform blends in with the culture of the school, there is effective leadership, teachers/administrators view it as important to them, and faculty have acquired the necessary knowledge for effectively implementing the reform.

Limitations

The limitations that were noted during this study can be explained as related to the defined and narrow scope of the study, the sample, and additional participants.

Defined and narrow scope of the study: This study focused on RTI implementation in the general education classroom, Tier I, with emphasis on the role of school culture, teacher beliefs and program knowledge. RTI, being a multifaceted service delivery method of instruction, has several areas that can be addressed in research. This study was limited to these areas because the researcher felt these were important areas that affected implementation efforts. Furthermore, this study focused on RTI implementation by general education teacher and administrators. Because this study was not focused on making generalizations, I was able to select a few participants whose stories and experiences would help many practitioners understand the daily processes of implementing RTI. The few numbers allowed me to conduct an in-depth study of lived experiences in the school setting as opposed to a collection of statistical numbers.

Therefore, even though it was narrow in scope, the targeted population was necessary in contributing to the literature on RTI.

Importantly, more research needs to be conducted on the perspectives of various practitioners on the implementation of RTI. It is only through the experiences of those implementing RTI in the field that we can better understand the successes and barriers to implementation. Large-scale statistical data is necessary for an overall picture of where we are as a nation in as far as implementation, but detailed interviews on daily activities that involve lengthy observations and interviews can also give a specific picture of what it is like to implement a novel program or a comprehensive school-wide reform.

The sample: The sample predominantly included general education teachers and administrators. However, interventionists and a special education teacher participated in this study. The perspective of RTI implementation was limited to this sample group. Stakeholders in the RTI process are more than this group of individuals and include other experts such as school psychologists, speech therapists and occupational therapists. For the scope of this study, the perspectives of these other very important individuals were not sought.

Furthermore, the sample size was limited to 20 participants from two schools within the same district. However, the variability in the description of RTI even within such a small sample is worth noting. There were also variations in the RTI process between the two schools and the cultures of the schools also varied markedly.

Additional participants: Both schools selected from a group of teachers who volunteered to participate in the study based on the provided criteria. However, in their selection, they included interventionists and instructional coaches. Both were scheduled

for individual interviews and focus group interviews. Their perspectives were shared in the findings and used to add information that later became vital. Both groups added information about Tier II and III, although these Tiers were not initially part of the research agenda. The inclusion of their information was predominantly to reinforce any information about implementation efforts at the Tier I level.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings in this study extend the information on RTI implementation in schools. They add to the role of school culture on implementation of school-wide reforms giving specific details to aspects of school culture that impact reform efforts. The findings also emphasize the importance of effective leadership and more importantly, the need for practitioners to have necessary knowledge of the reform being initiated. The data provided in the findings can also help districts and schools understand implementation efforts within schools. Furthermore, researchers can also use information from this study to determine areas for future research especially when it comes to stakeholders' perspectives and what stakeholders' view as needed for further investigation to aid effective implementation of RTI. However, there continues to be a need to investigate RTI implementation. The following are recommendations for future research.

Little has been done to investigate Tier I of the RTI process and the socio-cultural impact of implementation efforts. Therefore, the first recommendation is for more studies to find out the socio-cultural impact of implementation of school reforms. Educators inevitably develop philosophies and or belief systems that they deem important in driving

their daily activities both in the classroom and outside the classrooms. This study used the cultural theory to analyze practitioners' beliefs and school-wide culture on implementation of a school-wide reform. Using the socio-cultural theory may further help researchers understand factors that impact implementation efforts. The socio-cultural theory goes beyond the cultural theory in that it addresses social norms, economic issues, diversities, language, and family upbringing and how these components impact educators' pedagogy and decision-making. Furthermore, it addresses how educators interpret policy and eventually apply reform efforts in their schools. It would be interesting to find out how these dynamics impact reform efforts especially how they influence fidelity of implementation.

Second, even though there is an increase in qualitative studies on RTI, there is a need for many more. Educators' perspectives on reform efforts are vital not only to researchers, but to policy makers and other practitioners as well. Developing and testing interventions are critical but knowing just how they are used in the field and some of the challenges practitioners face is equally important. One of the ways to know whether interventions are working is by interviewing those that administer or use the interventions. Practitioners' perspectives should be used to guide further researcher and policies about what they [practitioners] should be doing.

Third, professional development, which has been cited in research as required for effective implementation of RTI, should be provided on a regular basis. New staff should learn about RTI and seasoned staff should be reminded about implementation expectations. Without continued professional development, RTI may not be implemented

with fidelity. It is important to also know how much educators contribute to evaluating their needs and determining what content is provided during professional development.

Furthermore, the initial knowledge of RTI should be found in teacher preparation. Colleges and universities should incorporate in their courses of study, not only the implementation of intervention strategies but also the RTI framework as a whole. This is even more important now that struggling students are no longer the responsibility of special education teachers only but the responsibility of general education teachers as well- actually all educators in the building. Now, with the growing importance of teacher evaluation, all stakeholders need to take responsibility of student success because if one stakeholder is not doing his/her part, then the whole team may take the fall for one educators' negligence. Hence, more research on whether colleges prepare teachers to implement RTI is necessary.

Fourth, the need for competency brings in a second theory that can be used to analyze RTI using qualitative methods of investigation. The use of Critical Theory (Guba, & Lincoln, 1994) may come into play especially when analyzing interaction between stakeholders. Critical theoretical approaches in qualitative research tend to rely on the use of dialogue methods that combine observation and interviewing with approaches that foster conversation and reflection (Giroux, 1988). This reflective dialogue allows the researcher and the participants to question the natural state of affairs and challenge the mechanisms for maintenance of order (Giroux, 1988). This is done in such a way to reclaim conflict and tension and regain a perceived balance.

Rather than naming and describing a phenomenon, which was the scope of this research, the critical theorist tries to challenge guiding assumptions. Critical theorists usually do this by beginning with an assumption about what is good, for example describing the tenets of RTI, and asking participants in a group, culture or organization to reflect on and question their current experience with regard to the values identified (Kincheloe, & McLaren, 1994). Critical theorists are not just trying to describe a situation from a particular vantage point or set of values, but that are trying to change the situation (Kincheloe, & McLaren, 1994). Future researchers would ask practitioners about what is working, what is not working , and changes that need to be made in the RTI process to make it more efficient.

Finally, more research needs to be done at the Tier I level. Many districts emphasize the use of research-based interventions for Tier II and III and neglect research-based instruction in Tier I. As far as reviews in What Works Clearinghouse from Institute of Education Science, Hundred Book Challenge is not featured as an evidence-based core curriculum, while Everyday Mathematics has been reviewed with reservations based on a small research base to prove effectiveness on student achievement. It is critical that the use of evidence-based instruction is used at Tier I. The premise behind RTI is that instruction is ruled out as a factor in student's poor academic outcomes. Poor instruction can be ruled out if research-based instruction is used and when it is implemented with fidelity. Otherwise, justification for the need for Tier II and III becomes invalid and it also becomes difficult to develop a direct link between all three Tiers: student success can only be possible when instruction in Tier II and III are a continuation of Tier I

instruction. All Tiers should be aligned even though intervention strategies are different in duration, frequency and intensity.

Summary

This study focused on general education teachers' and administrators' perspectives of RTI implementation especially on the impact of school culture, teacher beliefs and program knowledge. Before this research, there was no identified study that combined these three areas and investigated their impact on implementation efforts. The study was designed on a conceptual framework that school culture, teacher beliefs, and program knowledge played a vital role in implementation efforts. Furthermore, the conceptual framework highlighted cultural theory, structural-functionalism theory and conflict theory as important lenses through which to analyze the RTI phenomena and its implementation efforts as relates to school culture, individual beliefs and knowledge of this service delivery method.

This study provided insight on practitioners' perspectives of RTI implementation. Their views on implementation efforts at their schools, including what they considered challenges and benefits of implementing RTI, were shared. The results of this study support the existing literature that school culture, teacher beliefs (teacher buy-in), and program knowledge are important for effective implementation of any school-wide reform.

Furthermore, through this study underlying themes were developed to help understand teachers and administrators' perspectives of the impact of school culture,

personal beliefs and program knowledge. Through these themes, the researcher was able to understand what the practitioners' valued as important for implementation efforts, what they deemed as efforts hindering effective implementation of RTI, and whether they saw the RTI process as overall a beneficial effort to ensure positive student outcome.

This study further provided insight on various misconceptions by practitioners including practices by these professionals that actually hindered fidelity of implementation even though the practitioners had no idea that they compromised implementation efforts. The limited knowledge of RTI and its process by some participants further indicated that general education teachers needed more professional development for RTI implementation to be effective and eventually the projected positive outcomes of RTI to be realized. It is necessary for continued research on RTI implementation. It is through such research that areas that need to be addressed can be identified. Such identification can aid in improving implementation efforts so that RTI does not become another passing fad but a sustainable school-wide reform.

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APPENDIX A

Confidentiality Agreement

As the researcher in this study, I agree to use any information accorded to me including student data, test scores, meeting documents, and teacher or administrator information with utmost care and consideration of the individuals to whom they belong.

I also agree to maintain complete confidentiality in all discussions and written reports or feedback. All names of students, teachers, administrators and schools will be changed to provide anonymity and complete confidentiality to all participants.

In signing below, I agree to uphold the above confidentiality agreement.

Beverly Ochieng-Sande

Date

APPENDIX B

Invitation to a Research Study

Study title: Response to intervention: An interpretive case study of educators' perspectives on the role of school culture, personal beliefs and program knowledge on implementation

Dear _____,

My name is Beverly Ochieng-Sande. I am a graduate student in the Special Education Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study in Implementing Response to Intervention Systems in South Carolina Schools, and I would like to invite you to participate. I am studying some of the underlying factors that may influence the implementation of RTI. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to provide informed opinions concerning the implementation of RTI in your school.

In particular, you will be asked questions about how general education teachers are prepared to implement an RTI model successfully, what degree and intensity of training is required so teachers can implement RTI with success, if RTI is an effective way of identifying students with LD, and what the challenges are in properly implementing RTI. This investigation will involve an individual interview, a focus group interview and observations. The purpose of this qualitative research is to explore, some of critical elements in a school system that may impact implementation efforts.

The meeting for the interview will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place, and should last about sixty minutes. The interview may be audio taped so that I can accurately reflect on what is discussed. Members of the research team, who will transcribe and analyze them, will only review the tapes. They will then be destroyed. Your contribution to this research may be beneficial not only to you but to many other teachers and administrators who may be at the initial stages of implementation efforts.

Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location at the University of South Carolina. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed. Taking part in the study is voluntary. You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. You may also opt

out of the study at any time or decide not to answer any question you are not comfortable answering.

I will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at 843-468-1307, rotabave@yahoo.com, or my faculty advisor, Dr. Kathleen Marshall at 803-777-8859, kathleen@mailbox.edu if you have study related questions or problems. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance at the University of South Carolina at 803-777-7095.

Thank you for your consideration. If you agree to participate, please sign below.

Name _____ Date _____
School _____

With kind regards,
Beverly Ochieng-Sande (843-468-1307)

APPENDIX C

Participant Biographies

Barnes Elementary

Ann (Caucasian female): She had her certification in Early Childhood. She had taught grades one, two and four. She had worked in the education system for 24 years all of which were at this school district in different capacities. She had taught first grade for a year, fourth grade for five years and second grade for thirteen year. She held both a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Early Childhood.

Bob (Caucasian male): He graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education in 1995 and graduated with a Master of Education in Education Leadership in 2003. In 2008 he completed his Doctor of Education in Administrator Leadership for Teaching and Learning. That was his fifteenth year as a professional educator, ninth as an administrator at Barnes Elementary.

Gloria (Caucasian female): That was her second year as principal of Barnes Elementary. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Elementary Education. After teaching in the Latter County School District for several years, she received a Masters Degree in Early Childhood Education. Her desire to touch the lives of even more students led her to pursue certification in Educational Leadership and Administration. That was her twentieth year in education, and her eighth year in administration. She had taught kindergarten, grades two, three, five, and six and worked as an assistant principal in the middle school setting. She was passionate about educating children and about helping

them to learn to the best of their ability. It was her desire to be able to make a difference in the life of each child that walked through the doors of Barnes Elementary every day!

John (Caucasian male): He was in his 22nd year of teaching. Held a Bachelor of Arts degree in Early Childhood Education. He also held a Masters degree in Elementary Reading and Literacy Development. He had taught at Barnes Elementary for thirteen years in second and fourth grades. His goal was to make learning fun and to develop students into life-long learners. He believed each student had the ability to achieve. He also believed that we learned as much from our mistakes as we did from our successes on this journey called life.

Louise (Caucasian female): That was her 28th year in education. She had a National Board Certification and a Gifted and Talented endorsement. She had taught second grade and kindergarten in the Latter County School District. At the time, she was the instructional facilitator at Barnes Elementary. That was her ninth year in that position. As the instructional facilitator, she assisted teachers in integrating learning and instruction in all curriculum areas. She served as a mentor for new teachers and provided orientations and guidance for them as needed. She encouraged effective use of manipulatives, hands-on and practical application in instruction, and provided or scheduled necessary workshops, seminars, in-service and staff development for teachers to improve instruction. In addition, she was the test coordinator for Barnes and chair of their SAT. She was also the lead teacher for their Homework Center.

Natalie (Caucasian female): She was a first grade teacher at Barnes Elementary. She graduated in 2009 with a Bachelors degree in Early Childhood Education. That was her second year teaching at the school.

Summer (Caucasian female): She had just graduated from college and that was her second year teaching. She had a degree in Early Childhood and Elementary Education. She had previously completed her student teaching at this school and then worked as a teacher assistant. Many of the students she now taught were familiar to her.

Susan (Caucasian female): She was the math instructional coach. She provided interventions to struggling students. She also worked with teachers helping them with developing lessons or working with students who struggled in math. She had a degree in Elementary Education.

Hodges Elementary

Grace (Caucasian female): She indicated that she was in her seventh year at Hodges Elementary. She graduated in July 2006 with her Master's degree in Early Childhood Education. She earned her National Board certification in November 2010. She indicated that she continued her education throughout the school year and during the summer by being involved in professional development opportunities, workshops, and seminars! The knowledge and information she had learned each time she was involved in any sort of educational advancement she considered priceless! She had experience teaching kindergarten, first, and second grade. In her free time, she enjoyed spending time with family and friends, exercising, shopping, and traveling (especially to the beach)! She also loved sleeping in, cleaning, and sipping on sweet tea and Starbucks coffee!!

Jennifer (Caucasian female): She was the interventionist and reading specialist for first and second grades. She had an Early Childhood degree and was certified in Early Childhood and reading. She had worked for 38 years in the education system.

Julie (Caucasian female): That was her 13th year as principal at Hodges Elementary School. She served as half-day assistant principal half-day fourth grade teacher for 6 years before that. She taught 4th grade during her first thirteen years in education. She had worked in the school system for 33 year at the time. She indicated that she loved learning. Her philosophy was “A true educator will seek out new information daily. We never finish learning”!

Mary (African American female): She was an interventionist and the reading specialist for Hodges Elementary. She had a Bachelor’s degree in Early Childhood. She served as the reading interventionist for kindergarten through grade four. She had worked in the education system for 18 years.

Michelle (Caucasian female): That was her 19th year of teaching and her 12th year at Hodges Elementary. She was a special education teacher certified to teach middle and high school grades. She worked predominantly with grades five and six though she assisted with the younger children. She loved to read and share books.

Rita (Caucasian female): She was also an interventionist working mostly with third grade students. She had previously worked as a teacher assistant. She had a certificate in Child Development and could work with children from ages two on up. She had worked in the education system for nine years.

Sally (Caucasian female): She had earned a bachelors degree in Early Childhood Elementary, but was also certified in Elementary Education. In 2005, she earned a Masters Degree in Reading and Literacy. She taught second grade and was also a reading specialist. She had taught for 16 years.

Sandra (Caucasian female): She had been teaching for eight years at the time. She had all her teaching experience at Hodges Elementary, and she absolutely loved the school. She considered herself a lifelong learner. She had earned her National Board Certification in Language and Literacy. In August 2007, she had earned her Master of Education in Divergent Learning. She also had a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics. She was certified in Elementary Education and Secondary Education- Mathematics. She had taught third grade, fourth grade and fifth grade at Hodges Elementary, but third grade was definitely her favorite grade. She enjoyed spending time with her family and friends, traveling, reading, cooking, sewing, surfing the Internet, and most of all, relaxing at the beach with her toes in the sand!

Tracey (Caucasian female): She had been in the Latter County schools for the past 23 years serving in different capacities. She had a Bachelor's degree in Special Education. She was the SAT chair and she also worked with struggling learners from all grade levels.

APPENDIX D

Data Source

| | Participants | Individual Interview | | Observations | | Document review | Focus Group Interviews | |
|--|--------------|----------------------|----------|--------------|---------|---------------------|------------------------|----------|
| | | Administrators | teachers | Classrooms | Hallway | Student Performance | Administrators | Teachers |
| Research Questions | | | | | | | | |
| Questions related to implementation of RTI | | X | X | | | X | X | X |
| Questions related to school culture | | X | X | X | X | | X | X |
| Questions related to individual pedagogical beliefs | | | X | X | | X | | X |
| Questions related to knowledge of RTI | | X | X | X | | X | X | X |
| Questions related to other factors impacting Implementation or RTI | | X | X | X | | | X | X |

APPENDIX E

Individual Interview Prompts

(Administrators and general educators)

1. What is your understanding of response to intervention (RTI)?
2. Please describe what RTI "looks like" at your School.
3. Describe your role as a stakeholder within this model.
4. Who are the other stakeholders?
5. What do you see as the main goal of implementing an RTI model at your school?
6. Do you think all stakeholders share the same goal(s)? Why or why not?
7. Since the models' inception, what kind(s) of change(s), if any, have you noticed within your building?
8. Describe your school culture.
9. Can you describe the culture of the school during the implementation of RTI?
10. Would you say there has been a cultural change?
11. Do you think school community members (faculty, staff, and students) are "on board" with the implementation of RTI? Why or why not?
12. What are some aspects of the school culture that has greatly facilitated implementation efforts?
13. What are other factors that have hindered implementation efforts if any?
14. How did you first learn about RTI?

15. How much more information have you received/learned about RTI?
16. Where did you learn more about RTI?
17. What do you consider basic information teachers and administrators should have in order to implement RTI?
18. Can you talk about progress monitoring and its impact in your classroom/work, since the implementation of RTI? What information does the progress monitoring give you? Does this information change instructional practices?
19. Do you think Tier II and Tier III (in addition to Tier I interventions) are necessary and effective?
20. How have the three Tiers of intervention affected your practice?
21. Has RTI affected the process of referring students to receive special education services at this school? If so, can you give examples?
22. Do you refer students to receive special education services more? Frequently, less frequently or just as frequently as you did before the implementation of RTI? Can you explain why?
23. Do you think RTI is "working?" Why or why not? Anything else I can add or you'd like to say?

APPENDIX F

Focus Group Protocol

1. What is your understanding of response to intervention (RTI)?
2. Please describe what RTI "looks like" at your School. What are some areas that need to change and/or improve at I this school in order for RTI to be successful?
3. What do you see as the main goal of implementing an RTI model at your school?
4. Do you think all stakeholders share the same goal(s)? Why or why not?
5. Since the models' inception, what kind(s) of change(s), if any, have you noticed within your building?
6. Describe your school culture.
7. Can you describe the culture of the school during the implementation of RTI?
8. Would you say there has been any cultural change?
9. Do you think school community members (faculty, staff, and students) are "on board" with the implementation of RTI? Why or why not?
10. What are some aspects of the school culture that has greatly facilitated implementation efforts?
11. Concerning collecting data and using the data to make decisions (utilizing a data-driven system) for academics in your classroom, what do you feel are your areas of strength?

12. What changes need to be made in order to improve your use of the data-driven system in other areas district-wide?
13. What barriers do you foresee being encountered (by individuals and the school)?
14. Does RTI data help guide instruction?
15. Does RTI benefit diverse students? If so, how?
16. What do you consider basic information teachers and administrators should have in order to implement RTI?
17. How involved do you feel with the RTI process at your school? Were there any obstacles to implementing RTI this year? If so, what were they?
18. What are some other obstacles to implementing RTI?

APPENDIX G

Classroom Observation Protocol

Instructions: During each lesson, check yes or no for each item observed.

1. Describe classroom setup (seating, wall and board displays etc.)
2. Describe classroom climate (relaxed/tense etc.)
3. Describe teacher activities
4. Describe student activities
5. Describe lesson
6. Describe assessment

| RTI Components | Yes | No | Comments |
|--|------------|-----------|-----------------|
| Was universal screening used in this class? | | | |
| Is the universal screening research based? | | | |
| Is the core curriculum research based? | | | |
| Are there supplemental materials used? | | | |
| Is there evidence of progress monitoring? | | | |
| How many times is progress monitored? | | | |
| Is data from progress monitoring used for decision-making? | | | |
| Any additional observations. | | | |

APPENDIX H
Document Review

| <i>Document title</i> | <i>Document type</i> | <i>Where obtained</i> | <i>Document analyzed for...</i> |
|--|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| ACES | Rating scale | District office | Assessment methods |
| Achievements | Awards | District website | Student achievement |
| AIMS | Rating scale | District office | Assessment methods |
| AYP school report card | District and school yearly progress | State and District website | Student achievement |
| MAP | Standardized normative assessment | Hodges Elementary | Progress monitoring and Student achievement |
| PASS | Standardized normative assessment | State and District website | Progress monitoring and Student achievement |
| PD documents | Agendas and schedules | District office | Teacher training |
| SAT checklist | District designed RTI checklist | District office | RTI process |
| Student RTI documents | Student record | District office and Hodges Elementary | RTI process |
| Student work | Assessments | Barnes and Hodges Elementary | Progress monitoring and Student achievement |
| Tier I, & II Procedural Fidelity Checklist | District developed procedural checklist | District Office | RTI Process |

APPENDIX I

Data Collection and Analysis

| DATA COLLECTION | | | | | | |
|---|-----------------------|---|---------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| RESEARCH QUESTIONS | What Data | How Much Data/ Data Content | Location | Data Justification | Data Analysis | Theoretical/ Conceptual Frames |
| What are administrators and teachers' understanding of RTI and how RTI is being implemented in their classrooms? | Individual Interviews | 45-60 minutes | Classroom | Individual narratives | Narrative and Thematic analysis | Conflict Theory |
| | Focus Group Interview | 60-90 minutes Professional development agendas | Classroom Office | Exchange/sharing of ideas | Document review | |
| | Authentic Documents | Students progress data (PASS, MAP) | Classroom | Support interviews and observations | | |
| What do teachers and administrators perceive as the role of school culture in the implementation of RTI in their school? | Individual Interviews | 45-60 minutes | Classroom | Individual narratives | Narrative and Thematic analysis | Cultural Theory |
| | Focus Group Interview | 60-90 minutes | Classroom | Exchange/sharing of ideas | Support interview | Conflict Theory |
| | Observations | 90-120 minutes | Classroom, &Hallway | | | |
| What do teachers and administrators report as their personal pedagogical beliefs that influence how they implement RTI? | Individual Interviews | 45-60 minutes | Classroom | Individual narratives | Support interview | Cultural Theory |
| | Observations | 45-60 minutes | Classroom | | | Conflict Theory Structural-Functionalism |
| What do teachers and administrators report as basic knowledge that they need to have to implement RTI in their schools? | Individual Interviews | 45-60 minutes | Classroom | Individual narratives | Narrative and Thematic analysis | Conflict Theory |
| | Focus Group Interview | 60-90 minutes | Classroom | Exchange/sharing of ideas | Document review | Structural-Functionalism |
| | Authentic Documents | Professional development agendas | Office | Support interviews and observations | | |
| What are some other school related factors that teachers and administrators report as influencing how they implement RTI? | Individual Interviews | 45-60 minutes | Classroom | Individual narratives | Narrative and Thematic analysis | Cultural Theory |
| | Focus Group Interview | 60-90 minutes | Classroom | Exchange/sharing of ideas | Support interview | Conflict Theory |
| | Observations | 90-120 minutes | Classroom, &Hallway | | | |

APPENDIX J

Preliminary Codes using Open Coding

-
- | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Working with other teachers (WT) | 18. Working with parents (WP) |
| 2. Struggling students (SS) | 19. Life experience (LE) |
| 3. Working with administrators (WA) | 20. Contradictions (C) |
| 4. Demographics of students (DS) | 21. Praising the school/Admin (Pr) |
| 5. Working with students (WS) | 22. RTI description (RD) |
| 6. Teacher roles (TR) | 23. Description of stakeholders (DoS) |
| 7. Classroom set-up (CS) | 24. Goal of RTI (goal) |
| 8. Administrator roles (AR) | 25. Teacher Culture (TC) |
| 9. Reading programs (RP) | 26. Speculation (Sp) |
| 10. Teaching beliefs/philosophy (B/P) | 27. Student Culture (St. C) |
| 11. Progress monitoring strategies (PM) | 28. Benefits of RTI (B) |
| 12. Teaching experience (TE) | 29. Regional difference (R) |
| 13. Data-based decision making (DBD) | 30. Intro to RTI. Work/College (IR) |
| 14. Challenges/conflicts (C/C) | 31. Basic info for new teachers (BI) |
| 15. Working with support staff-interventionist (WSS) | 32. Community involvement (CI) |
| 16. Describing interventions (DI) | 33. Knowledge of RTI (K) |
| 17. School culture (SC) | 34. Math programs (MP) |
| | 35. Fidelity issues (F) |

APPENDIX K
Axial Coding Strategy

Stakeholders in the RTI process

Knowledge of RTI

Goals of RTI

Definition of RTI

Teacher buy-in/perspective

Personal Experience

Barriers to RTI process

Classroom expectation

Progress monitoring

Process of referral

Benefits of RTI

Change in school culture

Miscues about RTI

Inconsistencies within schools

APPENDIX L

Selective Coding for Theme Development

Categories from codes

Collaboration, teamwork, and networking

Active support systems

Children centered

Collective responsibility

Individual beliefs /Teacher buy-in

Positive personal experience

Developing a school-wide philosophy

Stakeholders' involvement /All in this together

Continued implementation

Limited knowledge

Contradictions/Miscues

Barriers

RTI Perceptions

APPENDIX M

Coding Process

| <i>Open Coding</i> | <i>Axial Coding</i> | <i>Categories</i> | <i>Themes</i> |
|--|--|--|---|
| 1. Life experience (LE) 2. Teacher Culture (TC) 3. Teaching beliefs/philosophy (B/P) 4. Teaching experience (TE) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal Experience • Teacher buy-in/perspective | Individual beliefs/teacher buy-in Positive personal beliefs | <i>Reshaping individual beliefs</i> |
| 5. Working with other teachers (WT) 6. Working with parents (WP) 7. Working with support staff-interventionist (WSS) 8. Working with administrators (WA) 9. Praising the school/Admin (Pr) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working together/teamwork • District and school support | Collaboration and teamwork Active support | <i>Collaboration, teamwork and networking</i> <i>Leadership and active support</i> |
| 10. Description of stakeholders (DoS) 11. Administrator roles (AR) 12. Teacher roles (TR) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stakeholders in the RTI process | Stakeholders' involvement/All in this together | <i>Stakeholders involvement</i> |
| 13. Struggling students (SS) 14. Working with students (WS) 15. Demographics of students (DS) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assistance for students | Children centered | <i>All about the children</i> |

| | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| 16. Classroom set-up (CS) 17. Progress monitoring strategies (PM) 18. Data-based decision making (DBD) 19. Math programs (MP) 20. Reading programs (RP) 21. Describing interventions (DI) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom expectation • Progress monitoring • Curriculum for Tier I | Data collection and decision-making | <i>Importance of data</i> |
| 22. School culture (SC) 23. Student Culture (St. C) 24. Regional difference (R) 25. Community involvement (CI) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change in school culture • Community and school efforts | Collective responsibility Developing school-wide philosophy | <i>Collective responsibility</i> |
| 26. Intro to RTI. Work/College (IR) 27. Basic info for new teachers (BI) 28. Knowledge of RTI (K) 29. RTI description (RD) 30. Goal of RTI (goal) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge of RTI • Definition of RTI • Goals of RTI | Limited knowledge Variation of structure Process of referral | <i>Necessary knowledge</i> <i>Perception models</i> |
| 31. Benefits of RTI (B) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits of RTI | Continued implementation | <i>No turning back</i> |
| 32. Contradictions (C) 33. Speculation (Sp) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Miscues about RTI • Inconsistencies within schools | Contradictions/Miscues | <i>Contradictions</i> <i>The unexpected</i> |
| 34. Challenges/conflicts (C/C) 35. Fidelity issues (F) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers to RTI process | Barriers | <i>Barriers to implementation</i> |

APPENDIX N

Tier I Universal Instruction for All Students RTI Fidelity Procedure

The administrator or instructional facilitator, as a part of a structured teacher conference, should verify the following:

- Teacher indicated research-based curriculum/program utilized and the student's area of concern(s)

Describe: _____

- Teacher provided student's initial screening / assessment results

Describe: _____

- Teacher described how instruction was differentiated, including frequency and duration

Describe: _____

- Teacher demonstrated the student's response to the differentiated instruction through samples of the student's work and progress monitoring results

Describe: _____

- Teacher communicated with the parent about the student's area of concern(s) and progress

Describe: _____

The administrator or instructional facilitator should complete the following items after a classroom observation(s).

Classroom observation date(s): _____

Select one of the following:

The student is making sufficient progress towards grade level standards

• End RTI

The student is not making sufficient progress towards grade level standards.

Continue the student at Tier I

• Modify or change differentiated instruction / strategies

Describe: _____

• Modify or change progress monitoring techniques

Describe: _____

Date of 2nd Tier I Fidelity Procedure: _____

Refer the student to Tier II for small group supplemental instruction/intervention.

Describe supplemental small group intervention/program:

Describe frequency and duration of supplemental small group intervention/program:

Date of Tier II Fidelity Procedure: _____

Administrator's or Instructional Facilitator's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Teacher's Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX O

Tier II Small Group Instruction/Intervention RTI Fidelity Procedure

The administrator or instructional facilitator, as a part of a structured teacher conference, should verify the following:

- Teacher indicated supplemental intervention/ program utilized to address area of concern(s)

Describe: _____

- Teacher discussed how small group intervention / instructional strategies were teacher directed and systematically implemented, including frequency and duration

Describe: _____

- Teacher demonstrated student's response to small group intervention/instructional strategies through samples of student's work and progress monitoring results

Describe: _____

- Teacher communicated with the parent about the student's area(s) of concern and progress

Describe: _____

The administrator or instructional facilitator should complete the following items after a classroom observation(s).

Classroom observation date(s): _____

Select one of the following:

The student is making sufficient progress towards grade level standards

- End RTI-
- Continue Tier II current small group supplemental instruction/intervention

Date of 2nd Tier II Fidelity Procedure: _____

The student is not making sufficient progress towards grade level standards

- Modify or change small group supplemental instruction/intervention

Describe: _____

Date of 2nd Tier II Fidelity Procedure: _____

- Refer to Tier III Student Assistance Team Chairperson
(Complete Tier III Referral to SAT)

Administrator's or Instructional Facilitator's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Teacher's Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX P

Tier III Student Assistance Team Checklist

Tier I and II Fidelity Review Forms must be signed before a SAT referral is initiated.

Date:

- Tier I Fidelity Procedure completed (**Print for SAT referral**)
- Tier II Fidelity Procedure completed (**Print for SAT referral**)
- SAT Referral Form (**Print for SAT referral**)
- Parent Permission for Educational Assessment Form (**Print for SAT referral**)

The following items should be completed after the Parent Permission for Educational Assessment Form is signed, but before the first SAT meeting:

Date:

- Vision Screening (**Attach results for SAT referral**)
- Hearing Screening (**Attach results for SAT referral**)
- Speech/Language Screening (**Attach results for SAT referral**)
- Health and Developmental History (**Print for SAT referral**)
- Attendance
- Discipline report(s) if applicable
- Functional Behavioral Assessment/Behavior Intervention Plan (required for ED referrals only)
- Anecdotal Record (required for ED referrals only)
- Woodcock-Johnson III Test of Achievement (as appropriate)
- ACES and AIMS Teacher Rating Forms
- Release of Information as appropriate (**Print for SAT referral**)
- Determination of Need/Assignment for Surrogate Parent (**Print for SAT referral**) if applicable

A minimum of two SAT meetings is required prior to a referral to Student Services. The following items should be completed at each meeting:

Initial SAT Meeting

Date:

- Parent Invitation to first SAT meeting
- Tier III developed target behavior and intervention
- SAT 1st meeting minutes form (**Print for SAT referral**)
- SAT Follow-up letter if parent did not attend meeting

Follow-Up SAT Meeting

Date:

- Parent Invitation to second SAT meeting
- Tier III reviewed progress monitoring and intervention
- SAT 2nd meeting minutes form (**Print for SAT referral**)
- SAT Follow-up letter if parent did not attend meeting
- Referral to Student Services for evaluation (Print for SAT referral)

APPENDIX Q

Academic Programs used at the Schools

Core instruction

- **Everyday Math-** (A K-4 Standards-based curriculum for mathematics (Fuson, Carroll, & Druel, 2000).
- **Hundred Book Challenge program-** Reading program for students to read books, complete assessments, and monitor reading progress.
- **Reading First-** (A federally funded program to improve reading in high poverty schools (US Department of Education, 2002).
- **Reading Counts**

Interventions

- Corrective Reading (Evidence-based intervention, WWC, 2007)
- G-3000 (Not evidence-based, WWC, 2013)
- Intensive Phonics (Not evidence-based, WWC, 2009)
- Language for Learning (Not evidence-based, WWC, 2013)
- Number Worlds (Not evidence-based, WWC, 2005)
- Reading Recovery (Evidence-based intervention, WWC, 2007)
- Study Island (Evidence-based, WWC, 2013)

Classroom management systems

- Daily Five

APPENDIX R

RTI Perception Models

In reviewing the various perspectives that the participants had of RTI implementation at their schools, I was able to develop RTI perception models. Practitioners view the reason for implementing RTI differently. Based on individual perspectives of RTI, some components of RTI may be more emphasized than others. I reviewed their initial response of what RTI was to determine what their perception of RTI was and what tenet of RTI they would most likely emphasize. From the teachers' response, I was able to develop six perception models of RTI. Below are descriptions of each model and what practitioners who are strongly inclined to believe in such perspectives would most likely emphasize.

Preventative Model: RTI is viewed as a model that prevents students from being identified as needing special education services. Practitioners view the primary role of the use of RTI as keeping students in the general education track by providing all necessary support and remediation for students to master skills. The prevention of over-identification of students in special education is seen as key. Participants who had this view saw RTI as primarily preventing students from being identified as having a learning disability and hence not going into special education.

Referral Model: RTI is viewed as a tool that is used to systematically refer struggling students for special education services. RTI is seen to be an organized method of referral where student are not simply tested by a one time test, but that a struggling student has

undergone a system of assessments and evaluations conducted by experts with each stage documented and team decision reviewed before eventual recommendation for special education services. However, the mindset is once a student is referred, the student should end up in special education services. General education teachers who had this view saw their roles as being the ones who had the task of referring students for special education services.

Instructional Model: RTI is viewed as a model for highly effective instruction where teachers are encouraged to use evidence-based instruction to ensure student success. This model focuses on instructional strategies and classroom management strategies.

Participants with this perspective shared how they felt implementing RTI had improved their instructional practice and made them better teachers.

Intervention Model: RTI is viewed as a model that provides struggling learners with interventions for them to be successful in the classroom. Emphasis is on the use of scientifically validated interventions for student success. Practitioners with this perspective focus on the interventions they provide to the students that would help struggling students.

Process Model: RTI is viewed as a systematic process of providing assistance at various stages to struggling students. The movement between and within the various stages is seen as fluid. In the Process Model, the perfection of the process is emphasized while team decisions are highly data-driven. The emphasis is also on the use of the same referral process for all students so that no one student goes through the RTI process in a different way than another. In other words the process is clearly stated with all

stakeholders following the exact same procedure with struggling students. The use of fidelity documents is encouraged.

Identification Model: RTI is viewed as an identification model with the sole purpose of identifying students needing special education services. Here, RTI is seen as replacing the IQ discrepancy model as a method of identification. Emphasis is on its identification properties with RTI seen as a more effective tool for student identification.

APPENDIX S

Observational Data

| <i>Observation area</i> | <i>Barnes</i> | <i>Hodges</i> |
|--|---|---|
| School environment. | Perceived as an unsafe neighborhood. Locked doors. | Relatively safe Open doors to school. |
| Building. | Some display of student work and awards. | Displays of student work, parent work, and awards. |
| Classroom setup Student/teacher activities. | Set up for different activities. Small-group instruction not observed. | Small-group activities observed. Teacher conferencing with students. |
| Universal screening. | DOMINEE-not evidence-based. | DOMINEE-not evidence-based. |
| Core curriculum. | Hundred Book Challenge-not evidence-based. Everyday Mathematics-not enough research. | Hundred Book Challenge-not evidence-based. Everyday Mathematics-not enough research. |
| Progress monitoring. | Power school, student work displayed (no graphs). | Power school, Computer printout of progress posted. |