

A Secondary School's Approach to Implementing Response to Instruction

By

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Abstract

Purpose: This study examined how a single secondary school chose to interpret and implement the Response to Instruction (RtI) framework, and how teachers perceived the effectiveness of implementation.

Research Method: This qualitative case study used archived data, observations, and semi-structured interviews to explore how the school interpreted and implemented the RtI framework, and gain insight into the factors that teachers perceived to support implementation. Initial a priori codes were informed by a review of literature, and codes were added or revised as additional data from observations and interviews was collected and analyzed.

Findings: Findings indicated that students needed a mentoring component in addition to math and reading intervention, and teachers perceived positive, deep relationships to be the most powerful factor that affected the students on RtI. In addition, participants noted that motivation, attendance, and language barriers were the biggest struggles that students in this study faced.

Implications for Research and Practice: The study concludes with a discussion of the role that mentoring played in the problem-solving team (PST) process, and the enabling factors and obstacles that teachers perceive to affect the PST process. Further consideration is given to how administrators can best support teachers through the PST process, and further research to investigate teacher perceptions of the RtI model.

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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Over the course of history, there has existed the struggle to provide equal rights to all groups of people. Perhaps one of the most remarkable shifts in addressing students with disabilities came with the passing of the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975* that was the precursor to the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA). These two pieces of legislation marked major improvements in addressing education for all groups of students, and ensured that everyone had access to a free, appropriate, high quality education (Winzer, 2009). In an attempt to identify students in need of services granted under IDEA, it became a generally accepted practice to use a discrepancy between a student's score on a test of general intelligence versus a test of academic achievement. However, research raised some questions about the IQ discrepancy model's effectiveness in identifying students with learning disabilities (Francis, Fletcher, Stuebing, Lyon, Shaywitz, & Shaywitz, 2005), and more recent studies have shown that a combination of IQ discrepancy and student response to intervention may be more effective (O'Donnell & Miller, 2011).

Research from the last decade found that two of the most significant problems with the use of the IQ discrepancy model were the over identification of students for special education services (Francis et al., 2005), and the wait to fail approach of identifying struggling students resulted in a large achievement gap between certain subgroups of students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). In reaction to these events, Response to Instruction (RtI) was introduced in light of No Child Left Behind Act's (NCLB, 2001) call for early intervening services and a reduction in the over identification of students for special education services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Over the past fifteen years, legislators have worked to improve education for struggling students or students with disabilities (Winzer, 2009). One of the most promising moves was the ability of

schools to use 15% of IDEIA money to support underperforming general education students with early intervening services (IDEIA, 2004).

The coupling of IDEIA funds with NCLB mandates initially prompted school systems across the nation to implement Response to Instruction (RtI) as an answer to the prominent need for early intervening services in schools (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009). The State of Alabama was one of forty-seven states to adopt an RtI model, and in 2009, the Alabama State Department of Education published its guiding framework for RtI, *RtI: Alabama's Core Support for All Students*. While the framework outlines the guiding principles behind RtI, it left many questions for Alabama administrators to figure out such as scheduling, allocation of resources, and managing schoolwide change (ALSDE, 2009). The purpose of this study is to examine how one Alabama secondary school is implementing RtI to improve student achievement.

Problem

Structure of RtI

The structure of RtI varies greatly from one setting to another, but overall the main idea remains the same: use a multi-tiered instructional approach to meet the varying needs of all students. The premise behind RtI is that student data is assessed at the beginning of a school year, and students are identified as only needing core support, needing moderate support, needing intensive support, or falling somewhere in between. The number of tiers varies nationwide from three to seven, and the State of Alabama recommends three tiers for their statewide model (ALSDE, 2009; Berkeley et al., 2009).

In the state of Alabama, Tier I is defined as a school's core instructional practices. If a student fails to succeed at Tier I they receive a referral for Tier II instruction. Tier II instruction

is supplementary instruction plus regular core instruction, and consists of small group instruction targeted at specific student deficits. Tier III intervention is additional supplemental instruction for students who fail to respond positively to Tier II instruction. Tier III intervention consists of individualized targeted instruction for students with significant skill deficits. Tier III is more intensive and involves reducing group size and extending the length of intervention time. Additionally, an intervention specialist is responsible for delivering Tier III intervention outside of the general education classroom (ALSDE, 2009). Students may be referred for special education eligibility if they fail to respond to the most intensive intervention efforts.

The school's Problem-Solving Team (PST) makes decisions regarding student placement and intervention protocol. According to ALSDE (2009) guidelines, the PST should consist of content area teachers, instructional specialists, a special education teacher, a guidance counselor, and a school administrator. The PST reviews student progress data at set intervals, and uses information gleaned from the data design an intervention plan with research based intervention strategies. The PST can review both behavioral and academic progress and suggest intervention protocols for either area.

Challenges of RtI Implementation

In 2009, the Alabama State Department of Education provided schools with a guiding framework for RtI implementation called *Alabama's Core Support for All Students* (ALSDE, 2009). While the framework provided guidelines for implementation, school-based administrators must make decisions regarding scheduling, funding, and securing resources (ALSDE, 2009; Dulaney, 2012; Fisher & Frey, 2011; Sansosti, Telzrow, & Noltemeyer, 2010). Very little research has been done to study RtI implementation in Alabama, but school

administrators in other states have stated that there is a definite need for empirically based research to guide RtI implementation at the secondary school level (Berkely et al., 2009).

Challenges of Scheduling, Funding, and Securing Resources

Scheduling time for RtI interventions, PST meetings, professional development, and student progress monitoring has proven difficult at the secondary level. Some schools pull students from elective courses to deliver intervention, but the pull-out option raises the concern that intervention students may be missing an important part of their education (Dulaney, 2012). Other school leaders have paired special education teachers with general education teachers to deliver interventions in a co-teaching setting (Fisher & Frey, 2011). Finally, many school leaders have resorted to streamlining their focus on reading and math, as they feel these areas serve as a barrier to learning in other courses, and they can maximize their time by focusing their efforts (Dulaney, 2012; Johnson & Smith, 2008). Overall, school leaders have struggled to find a scheduling model that fits the secondary school setting.

In addition to finding time for interventions, school leaders must also find time away from teaching to conduct PST meetings and professional development. Some schools work to arrange common planning periods for teachers of the same subject area, or grade level, so they may meet during the school day, while others conduct meetings and professional development before or after school. Either way, teachers must relinquish some of the time they would otherwise use for grading or planning, to analyze student data, plan interventions, or attend professional development. Researchers have noted that teachers identified planning for RtI meetings as a major source of anxiety when implementing RtI (Dulaney, 2012).

Leadership Challenges

The need for information regarding RtI implementation is not limited to guidance for structural processes. School administrators also need guidance on how they can effectively lead the second order change required by RtI (Dulaney, 2012). Marzano, Waters, & McNulty (2004) define second order change as complex change that requires the acquisition of new knowledge and skills and a change of direction from past beliefs or actions. The implementation of RtI requires school leaders that have an in-depth knowledge of curriculum, and the leadership capability to support faculty through second order change (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2004). Across the southeast, school administrators have expressed their need for research to guide the implementation of RtI in secondary schools, and for examples of quality RtI programs (Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008).

Researchers have shown that supportive school leaders are more successful when it comes to implementing school improvement efforts such as RtI (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2004), and that school staff feels that the lack of administrative support is a major barrier to the implementation of RtI (Sansosti, Telzrow, & Noltemeyer, 2010). Additionally, school administrators are not the only functioning leaders within a school. Researchers have recently studied how teachers, parents, and even students can function as leaders within a school, and as a result help promote school wide change (Hauge, Norenes, & Vedoy, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2007). The idea of shared leadership is not new to RtI implementation. Leadership styles that evoke a sense of shared leadership and democracy have been a topic of recent research into successfully implementing school improvement initiatives (Sun & Leithwood, 2012).

Transformational and distributed leadership styles have been at the forefront of the discussion regarding leadership models that evokes a sense of democracy and shared leadership

(Hauge, Norenes, & Vedoy, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2007; Marks & Printy, 2003; Mayrowetz et al., 2007). Both leadership styles rely on several common factors: shared vision, staff support and collaboration, learning communities, and improving instruction (Hauge, Norenes, & Vedoy, 2014; Leithwood et al., 2007; Marks & Printy, 2003; Mayrowetz et al., 2007). These factors can also be found regarding literature on the characteristics of successful leadership (Bernhardt, 2004; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Dulaney, 2012; Johnson & Smith, 2008; Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2010; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). In addition to being an effective leader, school administrators must put in into place solid practices to initiate school improvement efforts.

Leithwood et al. (2007) identified four core principles that can lead to successful change in the educational context (a) setting the direction, (b) developing people, (c) focusing learning, and (d) improving instruction. Setting the direction involves evaluating the needs of the school, articulating a common vision, and building the capacity for collaboration. Researchers have shown that creating a culture of shared leadership and collaboration help prepare schools for the changes required by RtI implementation (Dulaney, 2012).

In order to create an environment that has the capacity for change, a leader must develop the people of the organization. This can prove especially difficult at the secondary level, as teachers departmentalize and specialize in a particular content area (Sansosti et al., 2010).

Leithwood et al. (2007) identified four areas of focus for developing people: professional development, individualized support, modeling values and practices, and mentoring. School leaders can support their faculty through change by attending to these four areas of focus. In addition to supporting staff, administrators must also focus learning toward the vision and mission of the school. Researchers studying RtI implementation have found that the

implementation of RtI can foster unity by providing a common goal for all stakeholders (Dulaney, 2012).

RtI implementation is a complex and multifaceted process that involves a network of compounding variables. The culmination of information gained from a review of recent literature surrounding RtI implementation, school improvement, and instructional leadership led to the question: How do I examine such a complex process? The answer is through the lens of educational leadership. Research has shown that effective leadership has the potential to stimulate an organization's ability to sustain change, and may promote student achievement by having a positive effect on teacher efficacy (Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016; Marks & Printy, 2003).

Purpose Statement

Very little research has been conducted to examine the effectiveness of RtI at the secondary level (Sansosti, Noltemeyer, & Goss, 2010; Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008). Additionally, the vagueness of the guiding framework given to Alabama schools has left many school leaders with a lack of direction in how to make the RtI model fit within the structural processes of a secondary school (ALSDE, 2009). The result is a need for empirical research that explores the contextual factors surrounding RtI implementation.

In this single case study of RtI implementation at the secondary level, procedural data, achievement data, demographic data, and leadership trait data provided the fundamental evidence of RtI implementation. Data analysis began with the literature review, and an initial pass through observation notes, documents, records, and physical artifacts in search of units of data that could answer the research questions (Merriam, 2009). Repeating units of data formed the initial code list, which underwent revision as new data dictated. Additionally, information from initial data collection and analysis shaped the interview protocol. Interview data provided

additional insight into stakeholder perceptions of RtI. Categories were refined consistent with a constant comparative design, and data collection and analysis continued until new codes failed to emerge. Related categories of open codes formed overall themes, which underwent further analysis using a process model to identify relationships among themes as described in Chapter 3.

Research Questions

The research questions in this study include:

1. How is a single Alabama secondary school interpreting the RtI framework and putting its practices into place?
2. What are the enabling factors that allow this school to implement RtI?
3. To what extent do the practices of the school administration relate to RtI implementation?

Significance

Three main ideas contribute to the significance of this study: the nationwide adoption of the RtI model specifically at the secondary level, the lack of empirical evidence that examines how secondary school leadership relates to implementation, and the lack of research based strategies at the secondary level that guide school leaders in the practical application of RtI. This section will briefly discuss how each factor contributes to the significance of the study.

Research has shown that RtI is used nationwide as means to provide early support and intervention for struggling students, and as an alternative method to identify students who might have a specific learning disability (Berkely et al., 2009). Berkeley et al. (2009) determined that only three states had not yet adopted some form of RtI as a way of addressing underperforming students. As Berkeley et al. found, such a large-scale adoption of the RtI model brought with it a wide variety of approaches to implementing the multi-tiered model of instruction (2009). A lack

of fidelity in implementation combined with inconsistent methods of application has made it difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the RtI model in its use across the nation (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009). As a result, there is a need for empirically based studies into the contextual factors surrounding RtI implementation, specifically at the secondary level. The present study sought to provide insight into what leadership factors and structural process facilitate RtI implementation in the State of Alabama by exploring RtI implementation at one Alabama secondary school known to be fully implementing RtI as dictated by State guidelines (ALSDE, 2009).

A major focus of this study is to examine the relationship between school leadership and RtI implementation in the secondary school setting. Significant research has been done on what factors drive change within an organization, but according to researchers more information is needed that addresses how leadership affects the multiple and complex facets of RtI implementation (Dulaney, 2012; Sansosti, Telzrow, & Noltemeyer, 2010; Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008). This study sought to examine how the leadership characteristics of the school leaders in one case compared to the findings from literature on transformational leadership and leading for change focused on RtI.

Last, there is a definite need for research that guides practical implementation within the secondary school setting. Dulaney (2012) conducted a qualitative study on RtI implementation at the middle school level, and wrote that “more empirical evidence is needed to show how schools and districts are looking at the RtI model and putting its practices in place” (pg. 73). Similarly, Sansosti, Telzrow, & Noltemeyer (2010) noted the lack of information regarding RtI implementation at the secondary level and stated, “It would be advantageous to explore the variables that may impede or assist the initiation and maintenance of these programs in such

settings” (pg. 2). A study of how leadership affects RtI implementation has the potential to yield findings that could inform future practice for Alabama administrators.

Delimitations

The scope of this study was to explore the implementation of RtI at a single Alabama secondary school, known to be fully implementing RtI as dictated by State guidelines (ALSDE, 2009), from the perspectives of the school administrators, and staff directly involved with RtI implementation. The researcher’s background in implementing RtI at the secondary level, and experience witnessing both successful and unsuccessful cases led to the curiosity of exploring the contextual factors surrounding RtI implementation. The major delimitation of the study is the researcher’s choice to explore a single case of RtI implementation in an Alabama high school.

An Alabama secondary school was chosen due to the need expressed by literature to provide guiding research for the practical implementation of RtI at the secondary level (Sansosti, Noltemeyer, & Goss, 2010; Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008), and by the researcher’s background experience as a secondary level teacher, RtI coordinator, and administrator in the State of Alabama. The main concern of the study was not to create generalizable results. However, school leaders may be able to glean information from the case study that can inform improvements to the implementation of RtI in their school setting. The examination of a single case will allow for a greater depth of exploration without the concern for generalizability (Creswell, 2013).

Other delimitations include the researcher’s choice to only include the perceptions of school administrators and teachers, and the choice to only include the perceptions of staff members who were directly involved in RtI implementation. Staff deemed as not being directly

involved with implementation, as well as student and parent perceptions were not included in the study due to feasibility, and a perceived lack of immediate relevance to the findings of the study.

Assumptions

The qualitative researcher generally employs certain assumptions during the course of the study (Berg & Lune, 2012). This study employs five main assumptions: (a) participant observations were consistent with their native behavior, (b) field notes accurately depict the setting and conditions of the case being studied, (c) participant responses were truthful, (d) interview questions and questioning techniques were consistent across each interview session, and (e) student data accurately represents the actual knowledge and progress of the students in the case.

Definition of Terms

Case Study: an in-depth study of a phenomenon in its actual setting (Yin, 2014).

Differentiated Instruction (DI): varying instructional strategies based on a student's ability level, preference, and learning style to reach all learners and maximize effectiveness.

Early Intervening Services: a proactive approach to assisting struggling students with empirically researched intervention strategies and subsequent progress monitoring to measure success. In RtI, the goal is to assist a student as soon as they begin to struggle instead of waiting until they fall one or more grade levels behind.

IQ-Achievement Discrepancy Model: an assessment tool that measures whether a discrepancy exists between a student's scores on a general intelligence test such as the *Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children*, and their score on achievement tests such as the *Woodcock-Johnson Test of Achievement*. The discrepancy model has traditionally been a widely accepted process used to identify children with learning disabilities (U.S. Office of Education, 1997. P.G1082).

Progress Monitoring: the action by which students take an assessment to measure their baseline knowledge of a skill, and are then administered periodic benchmark assessments to measure their progress or response to some type of intervention or supplemental instruction.

Research Based Interventions: interventions that have been shown to be effective through empirical research studies.

Response to Instruction (RtI): also known as Response to Intervention; a multi-tiered instructional model that uses a combination of core instruction, research based interventions, and progress monitoring assessments to improve student achievement (ALSDE, 2009).

Specific Learning Disability (SLD): “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written and may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations (IDEA, 2004)”.

Successful Implementation: purposeful and focused implementation that results in the achievement of the goals and mission of the model. In the context of RtI, successful implementation characterized by positive perceptions from stakeholders, and an increase in student achievement test scores or graduation rate of the school.

Universal Screener: an assessment that given to each student in the school, usually at the beginning of the school year, and is used to gain a baseline understanding of the student’s skill level in reading and math.

Conclusion

In the movement to improve education for students with disabilities, IQ discrepancy became the common method of identifying students in need of special education services in the category of learning disabilities (LD) until research began to highlight issues with the sole use of

the IQ discrepancy model. One of the main concerns with the IQ discrepancy model was the over identification of students for special education services in the area of LD (Francis et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Recent research has suggested that the combined use of the IQ discrepancy model and RtI may be a better approach to serving struggling students (O'Donnell & Miller, 2011). However, it is important to note that RtI is not without its faults. Secondary schools have reported difficulty in implementing RtI for a number of reasons (Dulaney, 2012). Chapter 2 will explore the history leading up to RtI, what RtI looks like in the State of Alabama, and how leadership practices tie into its implementation.

CHAPTER II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the literature related to the development and implementation of RtI. It begins with a description of the historical evolution of RtI beginning with its inception as an alternate means of special education identification. The chapter then describes the state of RtI as a nationwide initiative, followed by a detailed description of Alabama's RtI model as it compares to other models across the nation. The section concludes with a review of the benefits and challenges that school leaders face when implementing RtI, and a discussion of the leadership qualities that enable school leaders to overcome such barriers.

Historical Evolution of RtI

The 1960s in the United States was a historic decade for human rights. The movement to improve the education of students with special needs was marked with the passing of the *National Defense Education Act of 1958*, which provided funding and research to support the training of special education teachers. Subsequently, the *Civil Rights Act of 1964* prohibited the discrimination of individuals in federally sponsored activities, including education, because of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (Winzer, 2009).

The *Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975* marked one of the first major pieces of legislation that included a detailed discussion of how students with disabilities should be educated in the least restrictive environment (Winzer, 2009). The debate over what constituted a least restrictive environment continued throughout the eighties, and in 1990 the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* was passed which expanded the types of disabilities addressed by IDEA. The 1997 amendment to IDEA required school officials to include special education students in the general education classroom, and align the goals from

their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) with the curriculum of the general education students (Winzer, 2009).

The passage of IDEA not only brought to light disparities in the quality of education that special needs students were receiving, but it also began to shed light on the disproportionality of minority students that were being referred for special education testing (Winzer, 2009). The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2002* (NCLB) was one answer to the growing achievement gap between white and minority students in the United States. NCLB required that schools show adequate yearly progress in math and reading with the goal of ensuring that all students were proficient in reading and math by the year 2014 (Winzer, 2009).

The restructuring of IDEA followed the initiation of NCLB to become the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004* (IDEIA). The passage of IDEIA made it possible for schools to use alternate methods of identification for special education determination, and allowed local education agencies to use 15% of IDEA money to support general education students with academic or behavior problems for the purpose of early identification of students for intervention (IDEIA, 2004).

The trend toward providing early intervening services continued with the renewal of NCLB in the form of the 2010 Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). The reworking of NCLB set out to improve student achievement by ensuring that every school had highly qualified teachers and leaders. Title II Part A of the 2010 reauthorization defined a highly qualified teacher using three requirements: a bachelor's degree from a four-year institution, state teaching certification, and knowledge of the content area in which instruction will be taking place. The reauthorization also included the development of college and career readiness standards to ensure teaching standards would prepare students for entry-level college

courses or workforce training. Schools were directed to provide some form of early support and intervention to address underperforming students and the over identification of students for special education services. In response to the new legislation, schools across the nation began to look toward a multi-tiered approach for providing early intervening services and progress monitoring to help close the gap between low and high achieving students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Martinez, Nellis, & Prendergast, 2006). Out of the new legislation, Response to Instruction was born.

Many states across the nation have adopted Response to Instruction (RtI), also called Response to Intervention. A study conducted by Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, and Saunders (2009) examined the progress of RtI implementation across the United States. Program implementation status was determined through an examination of data presented by State Department of Education websites, and verified for accuracy through communication with state department representatives. The researchers revealed through their findings that only three states, Alaska, New Jersey, and South Carolina have not yet specified a tiered model for early intervening services. They found that roughly 64% of states across the U.S. are either developing or are in the process of developing a model for RtI, and 30% of U.S. States are actively implementing RtI (Berkeley et al., 2009).

Rationale for Considering RtI Implementation

The theoretical assumption behind RtI is that the early identification of low achieving students coupled with early intervening services and progress monitoring will reduce the number of students referred for special education testing that ultimately will not qualify for services (Berkely et al., 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs 2006). When Alabama began its RtI implementation, only 78% of the State Departments of Education in the U.S. used RtI either alone or in conjunction

with the IQ discrepancy model to identify students who are eligible for special education services. Only ten states relied solely on IQ discrepancy to identify students for special education services, and many of those states were in the process of revising their regulations to include the use of RtI. At the time of this study South Carolina was the only state with no publicly specified information about learning disability determination (Berkeley et al., 2009).

In 1977, the United States Department of Education suggested that educators use a severe discrepancy between IQ and student achievement to identify students with a learning disability (U.S. Office of Education, 1977, p. G1082). Researchers have identified that IQ discrepancy and low achievement are not sufficient to identify students as having a learning disability. Francis et al. (2005) found that the failure to adjust for the moderate correlation between IQ and achievement test score results in the misidentification of students for special education services. Francis et al. (2005) used a comparison of actual longitudinal data from the Connecticut Longitudinal Study to evaluate the stability of groups when tested for learning disability classification using the IQ discrepancy model. The researchers also utilized simulated group data to remove the likelihood of group instability affecting results. Children ($n=445$) in the CLS were administered the *Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised* and the *Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Test Battery* beginning in first grade and kindergarten respectively. Researchers tracked the students through their primary and secondary school years, and selected grades three and five scores for this study. Researchers plotted bivariate distributions of the scores for achievement and IQ for both grade levels, and examined the data for shifts in the number of designations for four categories: (a) discrepant, (b) low achieving, (c) discrepant and low achieving, and (d) typically achieving. The results of the study revealed a shift in the number of children identified in each category for both the simulated and the actual data, leading

the researchers to conclude that using a single measure for identification results in-group instability.

The findings of the Francis et al. (2005) study informed us that using test scores alone might not be enough to categorize students as having a learning disability. Schools are equipped with multiple classes of low achievers with diverse characteristics, and IQ discrepancy models fail to account for the complexities of multiple classes of diverse learners as shown by the fluctuation of students between learning disability groups and average achieving groups. IQ discrepancy and low achievement are unreliable measures, giving both false positives and false negatives largely due to their one-dimensional nature. The resulting effect is that students with a high IQ and achievement are over identified and students with low IQ and below average achievement are under identified and do not receive the help that they truly need (Francis et al., 2005).

IDEA and the RtI model encourage flexibility and the use of clinical judgment to supplement the one-dimensional nature of diagnostic test scores. As Francis et al. (2005) stated, only including regularly collected data on response to instruction and intervention in the classification process, we can reduce the influence of measurement error from single assessments” (p.106). The RtI model is a way to use multiple modes of data to generate informed decisions about learning disability classification. The progress monitoring data from RtI can do more than IQ discrepancy alone. IQ discrepancy can only attempt to identify the need for intervention. The multiple measures of data used to evaluate students under the RtI umbrella allow for the specific identification of student needs, and can inform a plan for providing remedial services to assist the student in making progress toward improving student outcomes (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009).

It is important to the validity of the RtI discussion to consider the criticisms facing the program's implementation. Researchers such as Kavale, Kauffman, Bachmeier, and LeFever (2008) noted that under IDEA, a psychometric analysis could help accurately identify a student with a specific learning disability. RtI does not include the ability to distinguish between disabilities such as LD, emotional behavioral disorders, ADHD, etc., and RtI excludes the evaluation of cognitive ability as parameter for service eligibility. The result of using purely an RtI model would be the identification of slow learners as having a learning disability regardless of their cognitive ability. As a response to this critique, many states use RtI in conjunction with IQ discrepancy and state achievement tests to counteract such shortcomings (Berkely, et al., 2009).

Alabama is one of the states that use a combination of RtI and the IQ discrepancy model. The State is under a consent decree that requires the elimination of the disproportionality of certain subgroups in special education, and the IQ discrepancy criterion for referring students for special education is a reactive approach that waits until a student's achievement is so low a discrepancy can be identified (Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008). Researchers have argued that the reactive approach of IQ discrepancy is one of the primary causes of the disproportionality of certain subgroups in special education (Francis et al., 2005). The rationale behind adding RtI to the requirements for special education determination is that RtI takes a proactive approach to providing assistance to students before they fall hopelessly behind their peers, and it provides additional data for the use in learning disability determination (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). The theoretical assumption is that students who do not qualify for special education services will respond to research based intensive intervention, and schools will avoid the cost of erroneously testing those students for special education determination.

In addition to promoting student achievement through the early identification of student needs, RtI has shown the promise to help unify the efforts of all stakeholders to improve student achievement. Sawyer, Holland, and Detgen (2008) conducted a review of RtI implementation in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina. The results of this descriptive study are from a review of state RtI policies and publications as well as interviews with state and local education agency representatives. One of the findings of the review revealed that staff members from Florida reported that RtI may help the special education and general education faculties work together and maximize resources by unifying their efforts. Representatives from other states also stated that RtI implementation has the potential to assimilate the efforts of various categories of stakeholders around a common goal (Sawyer et al., 2008). It is important to note that these findings align with the purpose of RtI as stated by Alabama's RtI guide, Alabama's Core Support for All Students (2009). Alabama promotes RtI as a program designed to increase the success of students with diverse needs, and is not solely for the identification of students who qualify for special education services.

Response to Instruction (RtI)

The adoption of RtI has spread across the nation since the passing of NCLB (IDEA, 2004). For the purpose of this study, it was important to examine the nationwide implementation of RtI compared to implementation across the State of Alabama. This section will give an overview of the status of nationwide implementation from the most current data available at the time of the study, followed by an examination of RtI implementation in the State of Alabama.

The Nationwide RtI Model

The structure of RtI varies in application nationwide largely due to the lack of specification in IDEA. States must interpret the law and decide what measures to put in place

with very little supportive research to guide their efforts (Berkely et al., 2009). Due to the lack of empirically based guidance, implementation variations may occur from one setting to another in the number of tiers, person-delivering interventions, and the integration of special education. Critics have argued that inconsistencies in implementation have resulted in a lack of fidelity in execution and inconsistent findings regarding treatment application (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009). Such inconsistencies have made it difficult to evaluate the validity of the RtI model in its applications across the nation.

The implementation of RtI varies widely as the number of tiers may range from three to seven, and a particular number designation can vary in meaning from one state to the next. Researchers have begun to raise questions as to whether additional tiers of intervention truly add to the effectiveness of RtI or contribute to the wait to fail approach (Compton et al., 2012). Compton et al. (2012) examined three cohorts of first grade students from another ongoing study of RtI effectiveness as a means of identifying children as having a reading disability. The study sought to determine if it were possible to identify children who would be unresponsive to early tiers of intervention before they actually failed to respond at those levels. Researchers used universal screeners, Tier I response data, and norm-referenced tests as predictors of non-responsiveness. Researchers identified non-responders using local norm referenced assessments, and predicted responsiveness using a logistic regression analysis of the data. The findings of this study revealed that while additional longitudinal data for a student increases the likelihood of accurately assessing a student's progress, it is possible to determine special education qualification before progressing through all of the tiers of RtI (Compton et al., 2012). This study raises awareness to the importance of not letting RtI become a wait to fail model, and questions whether states that have an extensive tiered system could do with fewer tiers.

The integration of special education into RtI also varies from state to state. Integration ranges from complete segregation of the two departments, collaboration of staff and resources between the two, and complete inclusion of special education as a top tier. Researchers have outlined how multiple groups have varying views on the relationship between special education and general education (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010). Overall, there is an absence of judgment regarding the effectiveness of a single approach to addressing the relationship between general and special education. However, many researchers agree that the two groups could serve as valuable allies, and merge resources to improve instruction for all students (Compton, Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bryant, 2006; Hale, Kaufman, Naglieri, & Kavale, 2006; Kavale & Spaulding, 2009).

While there is a large nationwide variation in the RtI service delivery model, the majority of the models across the nation agree with using a problem-solving approach blended with a standard protocol approach (Berkely et al., 2009). The problem-solving approach uses a problem-solving team composed of faculty members that review individual student data and design appropriate individualized research based intervention plans (Dulaney, 2012; Johnson & Smith, 2008), while the standard protocol approach involves using standard research based interventions to provide remediation to students in small groups based on general need (Johnson & Smith, 2008). The commonalities that exist in most approaches across the U.S. include the use of research based instructional practices, meaningful professional development, and the use of longitudinal data to drive instructional decisions. However, aligning with the common theme of implementation variances, the problem-solving approaches vary greatly from state to state in regards to the number of steps used for the process and how they are illustrated (Berkely et al., 2009).

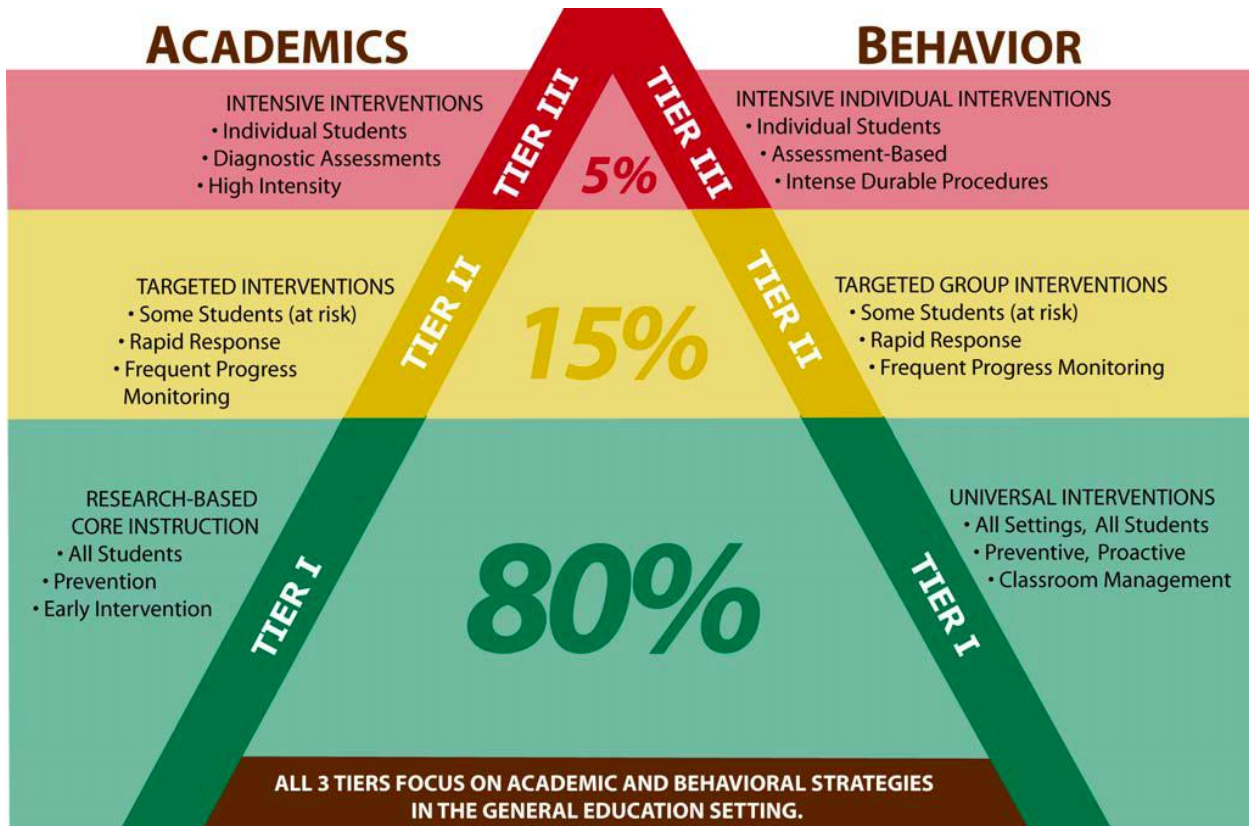
Alabama's RtI Model

This section will focus on the RtI model as it applies to the state of Alabama. Alabama utilizes a problem-solving approach that enlists the services of a Problem-Solving Team (PST) to review student data and design individualized intervention plans based on research-based interventions. Alabama's three-tiered RtI framework integrates general, gifted, and special education services to achieve high quality standards based instruction for all students. In 2009, the State Department of Education (ALSDE) published Alabama's Core Support for All Students that provides guidelines for schools to use during implementation. In this publication, the ALSDE clearly stated that the purpose of Alabama's RtI model is to "enhance the success of students with a variety of academic and/or behavioral needs, rather than solely determine whether a student qualifies for special education services" (p.1). The following paragraphs will discuss the problem-solving process and Alabama's three tiers of intervention.

Alabama's Core Support for All Students described the five-step problem solving process for Alabama Schools: define, analyze, develop, implement, and evaluate (p. 15). The first step is to define the problem and analyze the root cause of the problem. Then the Problem-Solving Team (PST) uses research-based interventions to develop a student intervention plan. The PST will then follow up with an evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategies used to determine the next steps in the student's plan. The PST collects and organizes data, facilitates decisions about student progress and interventions, and carries out this five-step process. According to guidelines set forth by Alabama's Core Support for All Students (ALSDE, 2009), the PST at each school should meet regularly to review student progress and work with teachers to make decisions about the student's intervention plan.

Alabama's RtI model consists of three tiers of intervention. Figure 1 shows Alabama's tiered pyramid for RtI.

Figure 1 Alabama's Model for RtI (ALSDE, 2009)



Tier I is comprised of general daily instruction delivered in the general education classroom by the general education teacher, and should include no less than eighty percent of the total student population. Alabama's Core Support for All Students (ALSDE, 2009) outlines that daily Tier I instruction should utilize research based instructional strategies, and that schools should administer benchmark assessments at least three times a year. Tier I instruction uses strategies that include modeling, multiple examples, and repeated opportunities for practice, review, correction, and feedback (ALSDE, 2009). The ALSDE (2009) lists several strategies for teachers to use at Tier I with students who begin to struggle (p.6):

1. Flexible grouping

2. Differentiated instruction
3. Re-teaching
4. Multiple opportunities for practice
5. Any needed additional support or modifications

Assessments for Tier I should include a universal pre-screener and progress monitoring.

According to ALSDE recommendations (2009), students complete a universal screener to assess letter naming fluency, comprehension, oral counting, number identification, and written expression (p. 6). Alabama guidelines also allow the use of state assessments for the screening process.

The ALSDE stated that Tier II instruction should provide students with additional focus and support-using research based interventions tailored to individual student needs, and should comprise no more than fifteen percent of the total student population. Tier II instruction provides remediation to struggling students, and provides enrichment opportunities for students who are already proficient in benchmarked standards. In Alabama, Tier II instruction may take place inside or outside the general education setting, delivered by a general education teacher, or instructional specialist (ALSDE, 2009). Instruction should take place in small groups according to skill deficiency or proficiency.

The ALSDE recommended that interventions align with individual student needs as indicated by assessments, and progress monitoring should take place weekly or biweekly. The PST, as well as the general education teacher, and any specialized teacher should discuss results of progress monitoring assessments. Secondary schools in Alabama are afforded a great deal of flexibility in how they schedule Tier II interventions, primarily because there is little information suggesting a best approach to scheduling intervention at the secondary level.

According to the ALSDE, Tier III instruction is the most intensive level of intervention, and comprises no more than five percent of the total student population. Students who fail to respond to Tier II receive a referral for Tier III services. Tier III intervention takes place outside of the general education setting, individually or in groups of two to three based on student needs. The Alabama framework states that an instructional specialist is responsible for delivering Tier III instruction. In some cases, a special education teacher who is highly skilled in the student's area of weakness may also deliver instruction (ALSDE, 2009). Alabama's guide for RtI implementation (ALSDE, 2009) stated that the central office or school should determine the length of intervention and amount of instructional time for Tier III students. The decision to move a student from Tier II to Tier III should occur after the problem-solving team has documented that the student has made limited progress with Tier II interventions. An initial diagnostic assessment identifies the student's strengths and weaknesses, and progress-monitoring assessments should increase in frequency with the transition to Tier III. If the student makes sufficient progress, the team may determine that the student should transition to Tier II or Tier I. A student is then referred for special education testing if they fail to make sufficient progress. School officials must follow the appropriate legal procedures outlined by the Alabama Administrative Code when referring a student for special education evaluation, but Tier II and Tier III data may be assistive when determining the student's areas of discrepancy (ALSDE, 2009). Alabama's tiered levels of RtI also apply to students who have demonstrated proficiency in a discipline, and Alabama's Core Support for All Students states that the tiers provide individually tailored instruction for advanced students. Alabama's Core Support for All Students (ALSDE, 2009) addressed students with behavioral concerns by requesting that they should be

evaluated using assessment instruments such as the Functional Behavior Assessment or behavior plans, and should receive strategic intervention and progress monitoring.

Challenges of RtI Implementation

RtI has faced many challenges upon its initial implementation due to its complex nature and requisite for second order change. Administrators face a broad category of complex issues when implementing RtI. This section will examine the literature regarding challenges of implementation in the areas of supportive leadership, time restraints, allocating resources, and the roles of participants surrounding implementation.

Research has shown that an RtI program implemented to fidelity has the ability to unify general, gifted, and special education resources and efforts (Fuchs et al., 2010), reduce the misidentification of students for special education placement (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), provide early support to struggling students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), provide an approach to improve instruction (Fuchs et al, 2010; Vaughn & Fletcher, 2010), and unify the efforts of stakeholders around a common vision (Dulaney, 2012). Despite the multiple advantages provided by RtI implementation, many secondary school leaders have struggled to implement the RtI model. Some of the challenges surrounding RtI implementation include providing supportive leadership (Sansosti, Telzrow, & Noltemeyer, 2010), scheduling time for meetings and intervention (Dulaney, 2012; Fisher & Frey, 2011), and allocating resources to make all of the components of RtI operational (Dulaney, 2012; Johnson & Smith, 2008; Wiener & Soodak, 2008). This section will examine the challenges surrounding implementing RtI, and discuss needs expressed by stakeholders that are coping with the change.

Effective Leadership

Researchers have shown that school leaders who are knowledgeable about curriculum and instruction, and provide supports for faculty to engage in continuous learning, are highly effective in implementing school improvement efforts within their school (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2004). Sansosti, Telzrow, & Noltemeyer (2010) used a qualitative focus group method to investigate school psychologist's perceptions of the barriers to RtI. School psychologists were selected due to their proximity to the intervention process and knowledge of systems level change. The researchers selected twenty public high schools for convenience and level of RtI implementation, and from those twenty public high schools, eight psychologists ultimately participated in one of two focus groups. During the focus group, the researchers asked participants structured questions about the facilitators and barriers to RtI. Researchers used a long table coding method to analyze data, and found that participants felt that the lack of administrative support was a major barrier to the implementation of RtI. This raises the question of why there is a lack of administrative support for the implementation of RtI.

An examination of additional studies may shed light on the difficulties that deter administrators from being able to support the implementation of RtI. In Sawyer, Holland, and Detgen's (2008) review of RtI implementation in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, and South Carolina, educational leaders responded that they needed more information about implementing RtI into secondary schools. Alabama school leaders commented on the need for practical working tools for implementation, reports on real world experiences, and examples of quality programs that work. The researchers also noted that when leaders have already begun implementing some of the practices of RtI before initiation, such as progress monitoring and

screening, having those existing practices in place can make implementation easier (Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008).

Sansosti, Noltemeyer, and Goss (2010) conducted a survey that revealed similar results. Researchers randomly selected a group of two-thousand principals from a nationwide database of National Association of Secondary School Principal members. The participants responded to the survey via email, and of the two-thousand, 467 secondary administrators responded. The survey revealed that many principals had an average knowledge of RtI, and believed that the implementation of RtI would be challenging. The principals stated that the biggest challenges stemmed from the vast number of changes required by RtI combined with a lack of empirically based guidance regarding implementation. The principals noted that evidence based interventions are lacking at the secondary level, and there is a need for a systematic method of data collection for schools. The authors of this study expressed that there is a definite need for research that examines the processes and supports needed by administrators to guide them in implementing RtI to fidelity.

Teacher Perception of RtI

There is very little research regarding teacher's perception of the effectiveness of RtI, but several studies agree that more consideration should be given to teacher's perception of the RtI process. One study conducted a survey of general and special educators as well as administrators in several rural and urban schools in Texas. The educators were asked about their experience in RtI, and their opinion of the process. The study revealed that the majority of the participants felt the RtI process was effective in improving academic outcomes for struggling students. However, the participants felt as though the documentation process took up too much time. Many of the participants felt a sense of frustration because they felt that they were already doing many of the

steps required by the process without the need for extensive documentation (Martinez & Young, 2011).

Another study was conducted at a large urban school in the southwestern United States that also used a Likert type survey to explore teacher perceptions of the RtI process. The survey focused on measuring the participants knowledge of the RtI process and opinion of its effectiveness in several areas. Findings of the study indicated that many of the participants did not have a clear understanding or depth of knowledge of the RtI process. Participants stated that lack of training, time, and resources as the top three barriers to implementation. Like the previous study, the majority of the participants also cited the demands of paperwork as a major obstacle to implementation (Castro, Rodriguez, & Moore, 2014).

Scheduling Time for RtI

Scheduling intervention time at the elementary level has generally been successful (Dulaney, 2012). However, many secondary schools have struggled to make the model fit within the confines of a typical school day (Dulaney, 2012; Fisher & Frey, 2011). Some school leaders have contemplated pulling students out of elective courses such as arts, family consumer science, or technology classes to deliver intervention (Dulaney, 2012). Other school leaders have tried offering an intervention class for elective credit in place of traditional electives (Johnson & Smith, 2008). The pull-out option raises the concern that we are failing to provide some students with a well-rounded education that is equitable to students who remain in their elective courses. Additionally, pulling students out of elective classes has the possibility to create discouragement and resentment towards intervention. With very little options to investigate, secondary schools are still searching for a viable scheduling method that allows for credit accumulation per graduation requirements (Sansosti, Telzrow, & Noltemeyer, 2010).

Fisher and Frey (2011) conducted a qualitative case study to examine intervention delivery and student outcomes that result from intervention efforts in an urban school located in the southwestern United States. Researchers collected data over a two-year period and included field notes from observations, interviews, and student achievement data. The researchers calculated measures of central tendency for grade point average, and utilized a constant comparative method to analyze themes identified in the qualitative data. The resulting findings indicated that changes for improvement took place regarding Tier I core instruction, progress monitoring efforts, intervention design, and the school wide implementation of RtI. As is the case in many secondary schools, the participants of this study had difficulty scheduling time for intervention. However, they were able to unite efforts with the special education department to achieve a common goal of improving instruction for students.

In this case, school staff was creative in the ways they managed the RtI process. Because it was a whole school effort, everyone was able to play a part. Special education teachers were available on a part time basis to co-teach in the classroom, and helped provide research based intervention materials for the teachers (Fisher & Frey, 2011). Teachers also held office hours twice a week during lunchtime to allow students an opportunity for tutoring, make up work, or clarifying explanations. Students attended the office hours of any content teacher in which they needed help. One student noted that this offered the opportunity to hear a concept explained in a manner that was different which helped with comprehension. The school also hired and paid students to serve as peer tutors to assist teachers in tutoring students. These students went through the valuable experience of applying for the job, submitting a resume, and interviewing which served as an enrichment experience for these advanced students. Title I funds were used

to provide payment to student tutors. The Fisher & Frey (2011) case is an example of how innovative school staff can unite to overcome the scheduling difficulties of the RtI model.

In many cases, the level of support provided by school leaders either hindered or helped scheduling difficulties. Dulaney (2012) conducted a qualitative case study, which examined a semirural middle school in the Southwestern United States. Fifteen percent of the student population fell in the minority category, and forty two percent were eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. The study set out to examine the change efforts of the school during the implementation of RtI through a constant comparative method. Researchers used a purposive sampling method to identify the case based on the criteria that they had not received prior training for RtI, and they were a secondary school willing to participate in the implementation of RtI. The findings of the study revealed the importance of supportive leadership to allocate time and resources to support proper implementation. In addition, the researchers found that support from school leaders fostered consensus building, ongoing professional learning, and the use of data based decision making which are all factors that have independently show to improve student achievement.

Some schools are only able to focus on reading and math intervention because they simply cannot find the time to focus on other areas such as social studies and science. The thought process behind choosing reading first is that reading comprehension is serving as the barrier to success in other courses (Dulaney, 2012; Johnson & Smith, 2008). Johnson and Smith (2008) conducted a study at a rural Colorado middle school, and described how fifty percent of the students enrolled in the after school tutoring program, as part of scheduling RtI intervention, have made significant reading progress. The success of the tutoring program led the RtI team to begin developing an access period at the end of the day where students had open access to

teachers to seek assistance for assignments. In each of these cases, the school leader's ability to make creative use of pre-existing resources has shown to aid in the success of RtI implementation.

Scheduling planning meetings and managing the data. Not only do secondary schools struggle with finding time to deliver interventions to students, but they also must create a school wide schedule that allows for collaborative time where teachers can administer progress-monitoring assessments, analyze student data, and plan appropriate interventions. Sansosti et al. (2010) found that school administrators identified that finding the time for teachers to attend problem-solving meetings and conduct interventions were highly important but most difficult to schedule. Teachers need content specific intervention materials and they are not readily available. Teachers have identified that the logistics of RtI is a source of anxiety when considering implementation (Dulaney, 2012).

Scheduling assessment times. Identifying times and tools for screening students have also been difficult at the secondary level (Dulaney, 2012; Johnson & Smith, 2008). School wide screening is very time intensive, and can be a challenge to organize depending on the resources available to the school. For instance, if a school on a five-period day is using a computer-based screener, but is only equipped with two computer labs that can accommodate thirty students each, it may take up to a week to screen a thousand students in two subject areas. One study noted that teachers were concerned about lost instructional time because it took two weeks to administer screening tests three times a year (Dulaney, 2012). Vaughn and Fletcher (2010) question whether there is a need for universal screeners at the secondary level since there is already a great deal of data collected for these students by the time they reach middle and high school. As noted previously, many states are using state assessments combined with teacher data

to identify students in need of Tier II or Tier III instruction, and avoid additional and costly screening assessments. Some teachers have begun using unit pre-assessments to help inform student placement for differentiating instruction prior to beginning a new topic in their course of study (Johnson & Smith, 2008).

Allocating Resources

In addition to finding time to fit the necessary components of RtI into the daily schedule, schools also struggle with finding the materials to supplement instruction. Johnson and Smith (2008) found that teachers faced barriers regarding the lack of differentiated instruction training, researched based intervention materials, and efficient progress monitoring systems. Research has shown that many school leaders face great challenges when trying to determine how to fund intervention efforts and secure needed materials (Dulaney, 2012; Wiener & Soodak, 2008). In response to the need for additional funding, programs across the Southeastern United States have tampered with making RtI a collaborative effort between special education and general education departments. Most of these states rely upon IDEA discretionary funds and other special education resources to support RtI implementation efforts (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008). Schools are reallocating their IDEA funds to support professional development for teachers, purchase intervention materials, and screening and progress monitoring tools (Johnson & Smith, 2008).

Many states have noted that the flexible IDEA funds are insufficient to support the resources needed for RtI implementation (Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008). Schools are able to use IDEA and Title program funds to hire Para educators to work with both general and special education students (Dulaney, 2012). Alabama uses not only IDEA funds, but also resources from the Alabama Writing Initiative, and the Classroom Improvement Section of the

State's education department. Educational leaders from Alabama have added that addressing RtI as a multifaceted general education initiative may increase receptivity to the program by school level personnel (Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008).

Participant Roles

There is some confusion as to what roles participants should play in the RtI process. Alabama's guide to implementing RtI affords each school district, and subsequently each school, the flexibility to allocate resources and mold the specifics of intervention and data collection as they best see fit. The supporting theory is that each school should be able to tailor RtI to meet their own specific needs within the basic guidelines outlined by Alabama's Response to Core Instruction Model. However, the unintended consequence of the lack of specific guidance has resulted in the inconsistent application of RtI.

Education leaders in some states such as North Carolina and Georgia have mentioned the need to re-evaluate the flexibility of RtI if time reveals the need for more prescriptive measures. School leaders are redefining the roles of teachers and auxiliary staff to meet the needs of the RtI program (Fuchs & Deschler, 2007). Many secondary schools have begun to hire instructional coaches to coordinate intervention efforts, provide guidance and educate teachers, and facilitate data management (Fisher & Frey, 2011). A study of Southeastern region school districts revealed that educators appreciated being afforded the flexibility to mold the model to fit their needs, but that schools need more information in helping teachers adapt to their new roles (Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008).

Under RtI, the responsibility for helping low achieving students become successful has shifted from the responsibility of the special education teachers to the entire staff (IDEA, 2004). This is problematic at the secondary level because secondary teachers are more reluctant to

provide interventions. According to Sansosti, Telzrow, and Noltemeyer (2010) secondary teachers expect their students to exhibit more adult like behavior, and be more responsible for their own success. Researchers from one case study showed that teacher support increased when teachers began coordinating intervention efforts, suggesting that school climate may have a large effect on the success of RtI implementation (Fisher & Frey, 2011).

Implications of Instructional Leadership on RtI

Leadership plays a large part of implementing change initiatives such as RtI (Dulaney, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Sawyer et al., 2008), but what leadership theories lend themselves to successful RtI implementation? Over the last several decades, two leadership theories have prevailed in the area of educational change: transformational leadership and shared instructional leadership. Research has shown that each leadership style has its strengths and weaknesses, and when strategically used in combination may promote the organization's capacity for implementing change and promoting student achievement (Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016; Marks & Printy, 2003). Transformational leadership centers on fostering innovation and empowering teachers while shared leadership embraces the collaboration between school leaders and staff on decisions regarding teaching and learning (Marks & Printy, 2003). When used in isolation, transformational leadership lacks a focus on curriculum; however, transformational leadership behaviors are necessary to build the organization's capacity for implementing shared leadership. Therefore, combining the two leadership theories in an integrated form can have an indirect effect on student achievement by having a positive direct effect on teacher efficacy (Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016; Marks & Printy, 2003). This section will compare these two types of leadership theories, and will examine what facets of each successfully support the implementation of schoolwide improvement initiatives. This section will conclude with an

overview of how school leaders can lead change through the four core practices that lead to successful change in most educational contexts: setting directions, developing people, focusing learning, and improving instruction (Leithwood et al., 2007).

Leading a school into the future is becoming increasingly complex for school leaders. The demands on a school leader are high in light of legislation that is driving changes in standards development, student achievement requirements, and policy mandates, coupled with scarce funding and few resources to support it all (Dulaney, 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). The rapidly changing environment of education has created the need for leaders who can create the capacity and climate in a school that is open to innovative practices and capable of handling higher order change. School leaders are responsible for driving the culture, securing resources, and providing the support that teachers need to succeed when implementing RtI (ALSDE, 2009; Dulaney, 2012; Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008).

District officials and principals are not the only functioning leaders within a school. Research has begun to examine the role that teachers play as informal leaders or as leaders with a formal role such as department head, RtI Chairperson, or peer mentor (Leithwood, 2016; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). In addition to school personnel, parents and students can also take an important leadership role within the school. Shared leadership roles within the school can take on many forms. In an integrated model that combines the characteristics of shared and transformational leadership, Leithwood (2007) identified four core leadership practices that are present in successful schools: setting directions, developing people, focusing learning, and improving instruction (Leithwood, 2007). The following sections will first discuss the implications of transformational and shared instructional leadership theories, and then will

examine learning organizations through the lens of four core practices that lead to success in most educational contexts.

Leadership Theories

Collegiality, a shared vision, and shared leadership have become the modern buzzwords for building the capacity for change in the educational setting. At the forefront of this discussion are models of leadership that evoke a culture of innovation such as transformational leadership and shared leadership. Researchers have shown these two styles to parallel one another in regards to many characteristics with only a few minor differences (Firestone & Heller, 1995; Leithwood et al. 2007; Mayrowetz, Murphy, Louis, & Smylie, 2007). An examination of these two leadership theories will reveal their advantages and disadvantages.

Transformational Leadership. Burns (1978) described transformational leadership as inspiring staff to work toward a common goal in lieu of self-interest. Transformational leadership pertains to the leader's ability to increase an organization's innovation, capacity for change, commitment, and engagement in goal achievement (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Transformational leaders tend to have a high emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is a leader's understanding and control of his or her own emotions, understanding others emotions, and managing relationships. Over the years, transformational leadership has taken on many variations. Contemporary transformational leadership models fuse characteristics from other leadership frameworks to create a more comprehensive model that is applicable in most diverse educational settings (Sun & Leithwood, 2012). The fusion of successful characteristics from various leadership theories is especially useful in educational settings where the role of the leader is multifaceted and includes managerial, instructional, and political facets.

Sun and Leithwood (2012) conducted a study in which they reviewed published and unpublished studies that examined six different transformational leadership models developed over the past two decades. From the six models identified across the studies, the eleven leadership practices shown in Table 1 were common to all six models. Sun and Leithwood (2012) acknowledged that one of the shortcomings of transformational leadership is that most models ignore the context of the organization. As a result, Sun and Leithwood suggest that there needs to be a component of transformational leadership that addresses the improvement of instruction.

RtI is an innovative practice, and research has shown that transformational leadership, and shared decision-making lead to innovative cultures that are more open to change (Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2010). Researchers have shown that both shared leadership and transformational leadership have a positive effect on the school's climate of innovation (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2010). Transformational leadership parallels shared leadership and both models encompass factors of successful leadership that align with the RtI process as shown in a comparison of Tables 1 and 2.

Shared Leadership. Shared leadership has a similar positive effect on the implementation of new change. Shared leadership has taken on many definitions throughout the literature, but each point to some form of disseminating practices and leadership roles across multiple individuals (Harris, Leithwood, Day, Sammons, & Hopkins, 2007). The advantage to shared leadership is that it has the capability to build capacity within a school to aid in sustaining improvement. Both capacity building and professional learning communities have a positive effect on sustaining change within schools, and shared leadership encompasses both of these characteristics. Distributing leadership to teachers has the power to increase student engagement

through the development of teacher effectiveness. When teachers are included in the decision-making process of the school, both teacher and student morale improve (Harris et al., 2007).

Opponents of shared leadership argue that the hierarchal structure of the school where administrators serve as evaluators of teacher performance do not lend themselves to a shared leadership structure (Marks & Printy, 2003). Other shortcomings of shared leadership include its exclusion of the principle that there are situations in which a more direct hierarchal leadership style may be required indicating the need for a situational approach, and principals who participate in shared leadership must be adept at promoting collegiality and guiding groups to arrive at a consensus. Leithwood et al. (2007) found when shared leadership was successful it was distributed to those with the knowledge and capacity to lead, and must be thought out and well planned.

The distribution of leadership can take on multiple forms. Gronn (2002) identified (a) spontaneous collaboration; (b) intuitive working relations; (c) institutionalized practice as three methods of leadership distribution. Spontaneous collaboration occurs when individuals come together to pool their knowledge to complete a common task then diverge. Intuitive working relations refer to the development of a close working relationship between individuals who regularly rely on one another's expertise. Institutionalized practice applies to formalized committees or teams such as a school's Problem-Solving Team. Institutionalized practice can result in intuitive working relations between team members who identify with one another and develop a solid working relationship.

Liethwood et al. (2007) expanded on Gronn's (2002) ideas and identified four patterns of alignment that emerge within the educational context: (1) planful alignment, (2) spontaneous alignment, (3) spontaneous misalignment, and (4) anarchic misalignment. Planful alignment

involves the Principal and other sources of leadership identifying and agreeing upon the roles of each individual or groups of individuals. Spontaneous alignment involves little or no planning in regards to which individuals are responsible for each role, individuals assume their own roles, and are productive in the short term. Spontaneous misalignment is similar to spontaneous alignment except the misalignment of individual skills to the required task lessens productivity. Anarchic misalignment occurs when individuals actively reject their role in the leadership process resulting in low or no productivity. Leithwood et al. (2007) found that planful and spontaneous alignment produces the greatest positive influence for short-term change.

Very little existing research identifies a single leadership theory that works best with the RtI model. Instead, successful implementation of RtI seems to hinge on the leader’s ability to adopt multiple leadership roles within the school. Table 1 shows the elements that research asserts are the most instrumental in successful leadership for each type. A comparison of the elements of transformational leadership and shared instructional leadership demonstrate the amount overlap between the two theories. Table 2 illustrates six characteristics that research has identified as important for leadership success when implementing RtI. A review of the literature regarding the characteristics of leaders who have successfully implemented RtI suggests that combining certain aspects of transformational and shared leadership creates an optimal leadership model for supporting the change required by RtI implementation.

Table 1 Leadership practices of transformational and shared leadership.

Dimensions of Transformational Leadership	Dimensions of Shared Leadership
(Aas & Brandmo, 2016; Leithwood, 2007; Sun & Leithwood, 2012)	

	(Devos, Tuytens, & Hulpia, 2014; Hauge, Norenes, & Vedoy, 2014; Mayrowetz et al. 2007)
Developing a shared vision and building goal consensus	Developing a shared vision
Providing intellectual stimulation	Providing task meaningfulness
Providing individualized support	Obtaining resources
Modeling behavior	Modeling behavior
Holding high performance expectations	Sharing leadership roles
Contingent reward	Providing encouragement and recognition
Management by exception	Adapting standard operating procedures
Building collaborative structures	Building collaborative structures
Strengthening school culture; Possessing emotional intelligence	Handling disturbances; Possessing emotional intelligence
Engaging in learning communities	Engaging in learning communities
Improving the instructional program	Monitoring the improvement effort

Table 2 Six characteristics of successful leadership for implementing change.

Characteristics of Successful Leadership	References
Creating a shared vision & shared goals	Aas & Brandmo, (2016); Bernhardt (2004); Boberg & Bourgeois, (2016); DuFour & Marzano (2011); Dulaney (2012); Hauge, Norenes, & Vedoy, (2014); Leithwood &

	Riehl (2003); Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers (2010); Sun & Leithwood (2012)
Clarifying meanings	Leithwood & Azah, (2016); Leithwood & Riehl (2003)
Communicating high expectations	Aas & Brandmo, (2016); Bernhardt (2004); Dulaney (2012); Leithwood & Azah, (2016); Leithwood & Jantzi (2006)
Evaluating performance	Aas & Brandmo, (2016); Bernhardt (2004); Leithwood & Azah, (2016); Liethwood & Riehl (2003)
Providing support	Aas & Brandmo, (2016); Bernhardt (2004); Boberg & Bourgeois, (2016); Devos, Tuytens, & Hulpia, (2014); Dulaney, (2012); Leithwood & Azah, (2016); Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers (2010)
Fostering collegiality	Dulaney, Hauge, Norenes, & Vedoy, (2014); Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers (2010)

The Four Core Practices of Implementing Change

Researchers have found that administrators view RtI as more than a simple model. RtI is a process that involves systemic wholesale change throughout the organization (Dulaney, 2012; Fisher & Frey, 2011). Implementing higher order change initiatives, such as RtI, call for a well-planned, thought out approach to implementation. Liethwood et al. (2007) recommends four

core practices that lead to successful change in most educational contexts: setting directions, developing people, focusing learning, and improving instruction.

Setting the direction. Setting the direction for the successful implementation of RtI calls for an examination of the school culture, and a school wide examination of the systematic processes that underlie operations (Buffman, Mattos, & Webber, 2009; Dulaney, 2012). Leithwood et al. (2007) cite (a) articulating a vision; (b) fostering the acceptance of group goals; (c) setting high expectations; and (d) promoting effective communication as key actions for effectively setting the direction of an organization. It is the primary role of the school leader to help staff members come to a consensus about the vision, mission, and goals of the organization. At the heart of collegiality is human motivation. According to goal-based theories, individuals are motivated by goals with which the individual has a personal connection, and that they find intrinsically compelling, challenging, and attainable serve as intrinsic motivators (McDonald, 2009).

To develop and articulate a shared vision for RtI implementation, Alabama's Core Support for All Students (2009) calls for school leaders to conduct a self-assessment to determine organizational needs and root causes behind the school's needs. Victoria Bernhardt (2002) suggested using four frames of data to acquire a complete picture of the school's needs: (a) demographics, (b) perceptions, (c) student learning, and (d) school processes. After identifying the school's needs through a thorough examination of the data, school staff can identify the vision that aligns with the needs of the school.

In order for RtI to become successful, it must become part of the school's vision and mission (Dulaney, 2012). Bernhardt stated, "If there is no focus or unified front in a school, there is also no continuum of learning that makes sense for students, and no structure to increase

student achievement (p. 2, 2004).” RtI serves as an opportunity for educators to focus their efforts on achieving a common goal (Johnson & Smith, 2008). Effective leaders are able to bring together stakeholders to develop a shared vision and mission for the school (Aas & Brandmo, 2016; Bernhardt, 2004; Boberg & Bourgeois, 2016; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Dulaney, 2012; Hauge, Norenes, & Vedoy, 2014; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2010; Sun & Leithwood, 2012). A shared vision and mission serve as the common thread for which all other resources build around. In order to realize a shared vision, leaders must be able to communicate relevant ideas and meanings as well as a sense of high expectations. Several researchers have identified the creation of shared goals and shared decision making as being key to the process of generating teacher ownership (Bernhardt, 2002; Hauge, Norenes, & Vedoy, 2014).

Building the capacity for collaboration. In the absence of a tried and true blueprint for RtI implementation, leaders have expressed the importance for building capacity and utilizing a team approach (Dulaney, 2012). DuFour and Marzano (2011) talk about how the leaders of effective organizations focus on building capacity for leadership and emphasize the importance of collaboration in the problem-solving process. Alabama’s Core Support for All Students (2009) recommends that schools work to build consensus and the appropriate infrastructure to create an environment that is open to change and RtI implementation.

Sun and Leithwood (2012) identify the role of collaborative structures are to promote networks, collaboration, and continuous team learning which become a part of establishing or reinforcing a positive school climate. Researchers have found that when stakeholders see that there is a plan and sense of purpose, they are more likely to provide assistance to supporting the

plan (Dulaney, 2012). ALSDE makes the following recommendations for setting the direction of RtI implementation:

1. Complete a self-assessment to determine organizational readiness
2. Create an action plan
3. Develop pre-screening criteria for identifying students at risk of failure
4. Develop intervention methods for addressing student needs
5. Create a progress monitoring plan

Indicators for the self-assessment should include the presence of an effective PST, high quality standards based curriculum, prescriptive assessment practices, interventions with necessary resources, and ongoing professional development.

In a study conducted by Dulaney (2012), school leaders prepared for RtI implementation by creating a culture of shared leadership and collaboration, and through forming professional learning teams to support continuous team learning. The advantage of involving all stakeholders is that each individual brings their own perspective, ideas, and practices to contribute to designing the learning environment. Researchers have identified three main findings that led to the successful implementation of RtI: (1) leaders need to build consensus and capacity for school improvement, (2) leaders must view RtI as a wholesale change and secure needed resources to support intervention and collaboration, and (3) teachers must participate in collaboration and continuous professional development to learn best practices (Dulaney, 2012, Fisher & Frey, 2011).

It is important for leaders to realize that second order change takes time (Cate, O'Hair, & Vaughn, 2006). Researchers implementing RtI have shown that it takes several years for schools to realize results, and there is always the need for continuous improvement (Fisher & Frey,

2011). Once the direction has been collectively determined, it is important to continually evaluate progress toward the goals, and effectively communicate the findings. Communicating successes has a significant effect on improving morale and motivation for teachers and students.

Developing people. The creation of a shared vision is not enough to create capacity for change in individuals. According to Leithwood et al. (2007), capacity comes from the atmosphere and experiences as a leader in the learning organization. Leaders must build a positive culture, modify structural processes, and promote collaboration to build capacity for leadership within the staff. Leaders must have knowledge of teaching and learning as well as possess emotional intelligence to create a climate of healthy relationships with teachers. Effective leaders have the ability and emotional intelligence to identify individuals that have the greatest capacity to serve as informal teacher leaders or take on the formal leadership capacity on learning teams or problem-solving teams (Leithwood et al., 2007).

Changing teacher's roles. Developing capacity for change among teachers can be complicated at the secondary level. Secondary schools tend to be largely divided and departmentalized (Sansosti et al., 2010). Secondary teachers often specialize in a single content area, and tend to oppose the collaboration required by the RtI process. Principals wishing to implement RtI often face the task of reforming the job characteristics of teachers prior to the implementation of RtI. This reform involves teachers taking on a more formal leadership role as the leader of a leadership team, problem solving team, or grade level leader (Mayrowetz et al., 2007). In order to nurture and grow the capacity for change, principals must attend to four functions of developing people: (1) professional development, (2) individualized support, (3) modeling values and practices, and (4) mentoring (Leithwood et al., 2007).

Providing professional development. If leaders have high expectations for teachers to take on new leadership roles, then leaders must provide teachers with effective instruction to support the development of high quality leadership skills. Just as theories for curriculum and instruction evolve over time, theories behind professional development and teacher education are continuously evolving. The transmission model of instruction once served as the primary approach to professional development, but leaders have begun to see the value in more engaging and interactive methods of professional development (McDonald, 2009).

There are various definitions of professional development but at the core of teacher training is the changing of an individual's mental models, core beliefs, and abilities with the purpose of improving student outcomes. Once teachers become aware of the new information, they would link it to prior knowledge, and then reject or accept the information followed by the transition to the new way of thinking. Adult learners differ from adolescent students in that they have a greater potential to link new knowledge to rich life experiences. Researchers have identified six adult learning principles to keep in mind when planning professional development: (1) create a climate of respect, (2) initiate active participation, (3) activate prior knowledge, (4) use collaborative processes, (5) make learning applicable, and (6) empower participants (Wlodkowski, 2008).

School leaders must work to motivate teachers to participate in continuous learning and professional development. Research has shown that teacher motivation is a mix of inherent and external factors (McDonald, 2009). Leaders can initiate internal motivation by igniting a teacher's sense of self confidence, personal responsibility, and achievement through participatory decision-making, making professional develop meaningful for the individuals, and supporting teachers through evaluation and feedback. Research has identified extrinsic motivators as

financial gain, career advancement, networking opportunities, and skill acquisition (McDonald, 2009).

Providing individualized support. With any change, there will always be difficulties, and it is the job of the administration to support teachers when they encounter struggles. If an environment of shared leadership is to be effective, teachers must realize the need for change, re-examine their roles, and take ownership of the need for school improvement (Mayrowetz et al., 2007). At this point, the principal must be more than a manager. They need to support the effort of the teachers by managing relationships, becoming an active participant in workgroups, providing necessary resources, and by maintaining cohesiveness of the organization (Mayrowetz, et al., 2007). In the context of shared leadership, Mayrowetz et al. (2007) developed a model based on Hackman and Oldham's (1980) job characteristics model that leaders can use when implementing transitional change. The model lists five primary job characteristics that improve job satisfaction by increasing meaningfulness, sense of responsibility, and knowledge of success: (a) skill variety, (b) task identity, (c) task meaningfulness, (d) balancing autonomy and interdependence, and (e) feedback.

An individual's knowledge, skills, growth need, and satisfaction as well as the organizational stability, structures, culture, relational trust, and micro politics moderate the primary characteristics that improve job satisfaction (Mayrowetz, et al., 2007). An examination of these factors makes evident the importance for leaders to evaluate the quality of relationships within the organization, alignment of the individual's skill with his or her task, and alignment of the goals with the overall mission of the school. While these five characteristics have a positive influence job satisfaction, it is important to realize that not everyone in a school can or wants to

be a leader. The leader must evaluate the overall condition of the organization first, as well as each potential teacher leader's knowledge, skill level, and willingness to lead.

Creating the capacity for shared leadership means that teachers will take on new roles in and out of the classroom. This means that teachers will be required to use different skill sets than they have before. The advantage to broadening a teacher's responsibilities is that they will experience greater meaningfulness if they utilize various skills to complete a particular task. The challenge to broadening a teacher's scope comes with expanding their skill variety. In order to be effective teacher leaders, many educators will need professional development in communication, interpersonal skills, and leadership techniques (Mayrowetz et al., 2007).

Principals must ensure that teacher tasks remain meaningful, and that teachers feel appreciated when reassigning roles. Principals must frame the change so that teachers understand that the work makes a significant contribution to the success of the organization, and has the potential to influence students beyond the teacher's regular classroom setting. Changing a teacher's role in the learning organization has the power to encourage them to move away from their current mental models about education, and expand their understanding of how they can improve the school and outcomes for students both in and outside of their classroom. Improving success for a large range of students can be a significant motivating factor for teachers. When implementing RtI, one teacher from a secondary school noted that, "I used to refer students to special education when I needed help with them. Now I have that help and I am part of that help (Fisher & Frey, 2011, p. 111)." Increasing a teacher's positive influence can have a lasting effect on motivation.

Secondary teachers can be very autonomous in their roles as classroom teachers. As Mayrowetz et al. (2007) stated, "Many teachers believe they can close their classroom door and

isolate themselves from the rest of the school to work with their children without much interference (p.79).” Balancing autonomy with interdependence can be a difficult task for principals. Teachers will feel a greater sense of responsibility if they are given autonomy, and the implementation of professional learning communities has been shown to be an effective structure for promoting collaboration through problem solving and student progress monitoring in such strongly divided environments (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Dulaney, 2012). However, when implementing learning teams, principals must cope with the autonomy the team has from the principal since principals are the individuals who are most accountable for school success. Principals must be able to find a balance between allowing the group to have independence, but still provide direction and maintain some sense of control (Mayrowetz et al., 2007).

The evaluation process can strengthen teacher satisfaction and sense of purpose (Mayrowetz et al., 2007). Through positive interactions, leaders can take action to help teachers build the capacity for constructively using feedback to improve instruction. Research has shown that leaders should work carefully when providing feedback so that teachers feel as though they are already doing a great job to help their students (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008). School leaders should be mindful of providing teachers with positive and constructive feedback (Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008). One way that effective principals are able to help teachers realize the need for change is through engaging in reflective practices (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Another method of helping teachers identify with data that supports change is through action research or collective inquiry (Mayrowetz et al., 2007). When teachers engage in data collection and analysis, they are more likely to realize the need for change (Bernhardt, 2004).

Providing feedback has the potential to promote learning if the individuals are open to constructive criticism. School leaders can open communication about areas of growth by should being effective listeners, addressing concerns from feedback in a timely manner, and provided resources to support teacher growth (Dulaney, 2012). The emotional intelligence of the leader plays a significant role in a leader's ability to build a relationship with teachers, help teachers accept feedback, and see the need for change.

Teachers are not the only individuals within a school to need development. Students also bring knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes, and preferences to add to the learning climate of the school. Students develop these characteristics from their parents, teachers, peers, and the school administration. Researchers have shown that parents who had a negative experience in school are likely to pass their negative perceptions on to their children who then carry that attitude to their school environment (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). As Leithwood and Riehl state, "student learning is enhanced when it is supported by both the school and the family (2003, p. 9)." School leaders can strengthen the environment for family participation by increasing trust and communication, providing resources to parents so they can help their children, and by tailoring school practices to accommodate families' needs (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Modeling practices. Changing teachers' roles in an organization involves a wholesale change in the structure and culture of the school, which can take several years. School leaders can support complex change by helping teachers make sense of their new roles, increasing motivation, and promoting learning (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Leithwood & Riel, 2003). Leaders will have to assume new roles in joint learning, managing learning communities, modeling successful practices for teachers, all while remaining consistent to the school's vision throughout the change process (Hauge, Norenes, & Vedoy, 2014; Marks & Printy, 2003).

Successful leaders have the ability to increase teacher's enthusiasm, positive attitude, and beliefs about their own abilities through leading by example.

Mentoring. Mentoring is a common strategy used by schools to provide support for new teachers, and can be a useful tool for creating supportive relationships between staff members and encouraging collaboration. Research has shown that mentoring not only benefits the mentee but also the mentor by encouraging self-reflection, developing teaching potential, and promoting collegiality (Beutel & Spooner-Lane, 2009). Being a mentor requires a skill set that is different from classroom teaching. Mentors must have a deep understanding of pedagogy, be able to convey knowledge, and illustrate to another teacher how to put knowledge into practice.

Researchers from one case study utilized a mentoring program to reduce the attrition of newer teachers, and to help revitalize experienced teachers (Beutel & Spooner-Lane, 2009). The case study examined the implementation of a mentoring program in a small rural secondary school that was exhibiting high rates of teacher attrition. The purpose of the mentoring program was to reduce attrition among new teachers, and re-invigorate the more experienced teaching staff. Teachers from this study noted that mentors felt they received the greatest value from building relationships with their colleagues (Beutel & Spooner-Lane, 2009). Participants also noted that collegiality and making social connections are very important in creating a positive climate. When implementing new initiatives such as RtI, a mentoring program can provide support for teachers who are new to the organization.

Researchers have identified that there is a need for structures to support and foster a community that has the capacity for change (McDonald, 2009). Mentoring can serve as one of the support structures for promoting collegiality, but leaders must be aware that creating a mentoring program is not without its challenges (Beutel & Spooner-Lane, 2009). Engaging in a

mentoring relationship takes time that can become scarce as the school year progresses. Mentor's and mentees are more likely to benefit each other if they have a genuine interest in forming a relationship, and a forced relationship will rarely result in a positive experience. Mentors will likely require training in effective listening, observing, and providing appropriate feedback (Beutel & Spooner-Lane, 2009). With planning and preparation, a mentoring program can help build the capacity for school wide change.

Focus learning to develop the organization. The implementation of RtI is an opportunity to unite staff and other stakeholders together around a common goal (Dulaney, 2012). However, such change calls for a cultural restructuring and redefining of leader roles within the organization. Cultural restructuring can be a daunting task in the face of existing political climates that emphasize standards, accountability, and high stakes testing (Jenlink & Jenlink, 2008). School leaders seeking organizational change must work to create a democratic environment where teachers can maximize their motivations and capacities. Leithwood et al. (2007) identified several functions that leaders should tend to when considering change in an organization:

- Promoting collaboration
- Strengthening the sense of community
- Involving community stakeholders
- Creating professional learning communities
- Strengthening school culture
- Evaluating and adjusting the structure of the organization
- Fostering relationships with district officials

Collegiality and collaboration are prime factors in building a successful culture for continuous team learning. Effective leaders are able to promote collaboration and accomplish cultural restructuring by building extensive networks through positive interpersonal interactions, by developing meaningful relationships, and by securing resources needed for teachers to collaborate (Leithwood et al., 2007). Leaders can promote collaboration by participating in shared leadership practices and by focusing on building meaningful trusting relationships with all stakeholders. In order to promote successful collaboration leaders should participate in modeling collaboration in their own tasks, develop goals for collaboration, encourage consensus building among staff, and nurture a climate of trust and respect among colleagues (Leithwood, 2012).

In order to sustain collaborative efforts, leaders must also attend to the other structures that support the organization. Leaders must ensure that students are engaged in learning, and teachers have opportunities to work on improvement efforts (Leithwood et al., 2006). Effective leaders also institute collaborative problem-solving teams to examining school data, and ensure that structures and procedures align to support the goals, vision, and mission of the school (Bernhardt, 2004; Leithwood et al., 2006; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Communication with parents and community stakeholders is also important for supporting change and improvement. Not only can community relationships be a source of resources for school improvement, but also parent involvement has a significant effect on student achievement (Leithwood, 2012). Leaders can reach out to the community by creating a welcoming environment for parents, engage staff in reaching out to the community, work with staff to create accommodations for diverse learners, and encourage teachers to invite parents and other community members to engage in school activities (Leithwood, 2012).

Leaders must create an environment where staff and students feel safe and free to participate and learn. Much of the literature on school improvement and RtI focuses on improving organizational capacity and instructional methods (Leithwood, 2012). However, research has confirmed that the physical structures and processes of the school must also communicate a sense of safety, organization, and wellbeing. School leaders can promote a positive culture by attending to the physical structure and aesthetics of the school, promoting a positive school culture opposed to violence, utilizing a discipline plan that communicates clear expectations, and by rewarding positive behaviors (Leithwood, 2012). School administrators can promote an environment of focused learning by securing the resources necessary to ensure success. Administrators can start by selecting high quality staff that is open to innovation. In addition to attending to the quality of staff, administrators should ensure that all teachers are equipped with the curriculum materials, planning time, and technology necessary to provide planned instruction that aligns with the vision of the school (Leithwood, 2012).

Improving instruction. The quality of teachers in a school has the greatest influence on student achievement (Leithwood, 2012). One premise of RtI is that all teachers must be highly qualified in the state in which they teach. However, teacher quality goes beyond the highly qualified title. Quality teachers have a strong commitment to lifelong learning and professional growth, an extensive knowledge of content and pedagogy, the desire to participate in collaborative practices, and a willingness to work toward the shared goals of the organization. Additionally, leadership plays a significant role in retaining high quality staff once they are hired. Proficient teachers are more likely to remain at a school where they feel there is a positive climate, and a transformational leadership model (Leithwood, 2012). Transformational leaders appeal to quality teachers by providing supportive training and professional development,

inviting teachers to take on leadership roles as part of a distributed leadership model, scheduling time for planning and collaboration, creating a shared vision, and forging meaningful relationships build on mutual trust and respect (Leithwood, 2012).

Providing support for high quality teachers plays a role in fortifying instruction. Leaders indirectly support instruction by creating a positive climate and culture, setting the direction of the organization, and developing capacity within staff members. Nevertheless, leaders directly affect instruction by being visible, evaluating teaching practices, participating in curriculum development, and budgeting for and allocating resources necessary for engaging instruction (Leithwood, 2012). Leaders who wish to maximize their influence on teaching and learning should make themselves available to participate in learning opportunities so that they have the knowledge to advise teachers about problematic situations. Leaders should also become adept at evaluating classroom instruction and providing valuable and appropriate feedback to encourage professional growth (Leithwood, 2012). States such as North Carolina are recommending that administrators attend professional development with the teachers so their involvement may lead to increased collegiality and more effective implementation (Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008).

Because RtI is multifaceted program, large-scale professional development in many areas is required. North Carolina provided training to its local education agencies in thirteen areas: problem solving, reading, writing, math, and behavior interventions, literacy indicators, team building, progress monitoring, screening, curriculum based measurement, data collection, implementation steps, and report writing (Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008). According to Fuchs and Deschler (2007), schools must invest in targeted professional development that includes follow up training in order to allow educators enough time to understand the new principles brought forth by RtI. Additionally, it is up to the school leaders to implement the

initiative with fidelity. School leaders must be adept in every aspect of RtI in order to monitor the effectiveness of its implementation.

In addition to monitoring teacher progress, leaders should also monitor student progress. School leaders use data to monitor evidence of student learning (ALSDE, 2009). Administrators should examine data related to student achievement, classroom conditions, and school wide progress toward achieving goals (Bernhardt, 2002). The principal's role is to guide the staff in understanding and interpreting student data, securing multiple modes of data for analysis, and center improvement efforts on addressing subgroups that have the greatest achievement gap. School leaders should collect longitudinal data, and analyze data to identify needs for improvement. In order for progress monitoring to be effective, leaders need to provide leadership teams or data teams with training in data collection and analysis, and provide teams with ample time to analyze data (Bernhardt, 2002).

Successful administrators understand that time is valuable. A characteristic of an effective organization is the absence of distractions that detract from instructional time. Effective leaders know how to combine instructional and transformational leadership in order to manage discipline, daily disruptions, and extracurricular activities, and foster innovation so that teachers can devote their time to instruction, planning, or problem solving (Marks & Printy, 2003). Administrators and staff should work collaboratively to develop norms about the amount of time allotted for non-instructional activities such as club obligations or coaching duties.

Effective Instruction. Secondary students can pose unique challenges compared to elementary students. Achievement growth in secondary students is markedly slower than in elementary students, and by the time, some students have reached high school they may be multiple grade levels behind their peers. To teachers, it may seem nearly impossible to close the

gap before its time for the student to graduate. Additionally, it is important to remember that intervention methods that work in one setting may be ineffective in another setting (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Successful educators are able to work collaboratively to evaluate the needs of the school, and identify strategies that are most likely to be successful for their particular situation.

Before intervention can become effective, principals and staff must work to create a sense of caring and belonging for students. Creating a sense of community has the power to improve attitudes towards learning and increase motivation to learn (Beutel & Spooner-Lane, 2009). Personalized learning environments and learning communities are two methods improve the school's climate for students (Beutel & Spooner-Lane, 2009). Research has shown that collaboration among staff has the ability to create a positive environment conducive to student learning (Marks & Printy, 2003).

Intervention methods. Schools have begun to look to their special education teachers for guidance in identifying research based intervention strategies. The utilization of special education teachers in this manner supports the idea suggested by Fuchs et al. (2010) that the blending of special education and general education resources may be a solution to school's resource problems. Researchers have noted that it can enhance success in implementing RtI when teachers are already familiar with the strategies that special educators can provide to support instruction for all struggling students (Fisher & Frey, 2011). As one high school special education teacher noted, "I'm in a lot of classrooms every day for supplemental intervention, but not only for students with IEPs. Sometimes I'm there as part of the RtI efforts, helping a student become successful (Fisher & Frey, 2011, p. 111)."

Educators from Georgia schools have noted that the shift to using differentiated instruction has been difficult due to a lack of skills and experience in using a tiered intervention system (Sawyer et al, 2008). Some schools are suggesting differentiated instruction at the second and third tiers, but others are feel that differentiated instruction should appear as part of Tier I instruction. Some schools are concentrating their initial efforts on improving Tier I instruction before moving the focus to Tier II then Tier III based on the premise that improving general instruction will lessen the number of students in need of more intensive intervention (Johnson & Smith, 2008). The goal for RtI is to improve core instructional strategies so that fewer students need tier II or III interventions (Fisher & Frey, 2011; Sawyer et al., 2008). One unforeseen advantage to differentiating instruction is that it opens teacher's awareness to the variety of learning styles that are present within their classroom (Johnson & Smith, 2008).

Effective strategies include reciprocal teaching, graphic organizers, and project based learning activities (Dulaney, 2012). School districts in Mississippi have seen success when using evidence based models and interventions with RtI (Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008). Researchers studying a Colorado school noted that student completion of assignments increased with the opportunity to choose from various assignments (Johnson & Smith, 2008). Many schools are implementing the use of evidence based computer programs to provide intervention under the guidance of an intervention teacher (Dulaney, 2012; Johnson & Smith, 2008).

Mathematics teachers have had particular difficulty identifying interventions for complex problems requiring the transference of information from one context to another. Small groups and peer tutoring are two strategies that math teachers often use to address struggling learners (Fuchs, Fuchs, Craddock, Hollenbeck, Hamlett, & Schatschneider, 2008). Studies have shown that both small groups and peer tutoring are effective methods of assisting at risk students.

However, in a study by Fuchs et al., (2008) set out to identify the effectiveness of small group tutoring in improving performance on at risk students' ability to solve problems requiring the transference of information such as required by word problems. Fuchs et al., (2008) found that small group tutoring does in fact have a positive effect on achievement compared to validated classroom instruction alone.

Many schools have also found success in layering multiple intervention strategies (Johnson & Smith, 2008). In order to lessen the burden of locating intervention activities for students, some schools are creating a bank of standard protocol interventions to assist teachers. Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) can improve math computational skills (Calhoun & Fuchs, 2003). These strategies represent a small sampling of intervention materials used by secondary schools. However, there remains a need for empirical research that validates interventions for use in secondary schools that are implementing RtI followed by professional development where these approaches were modeled (Sansoti, Telzrow, & Noltemeyer, 2010).

Evidence based decision-making. Data use in schools has surged in light of new accountability requirements and the drive for evidence based decision-making (Anderson, Leithwood, & Strauss, 2010). Informal data collection is continually taking place in the form of observations, conversations, and interactions with individuals. This informal data can give us a snapshot into the general climate of a school, but cannot afford us the depth of understanding that more formal data collection can provide (Anderson et al., 2010).

Formal data collection can be individualized or aggregated to provide a holistic view of school conditions (Bernhardt, 2002). RtI calls for the examination of both individual and aggregate data on which to base instructional decisions. School leaders use individual student data to evaluate student success, assign placement within the tiers of RtI, and plan for

intervention or enrichment (ALSDE, 2009). School leaders use aggregate data to determine the overall condition of the program, and identify areas of strength or weakness in the school's instructional processes. School leaders can disaggregate data to analyze the performance of particular subgroups, identify gaps between subgroups, or evaluate intervention effectiveness for particular subgroups such as English Language Learners (Anderson et al., 2010).

State test scores and formative assessments are not all that there is to data. Reaching beyond achievement data to demographic, perception and process data can give educators a more accurate depiction of the root cause of achievement problems (Bernhardt, 2004). When conducting a problem-solving session, it is important for teams to examine multiple modes of data to obtain a complete picture of the problem (Bernhardt, 2004). State mandated achievement tests focus on narrow standards to evaluate student progress. This narrow focus on data fails to provide educators with a complete picture of the student or groups of students. An examination of multiple modes of data as outlined by Bernhardt's (2004) four lenses provides us with information that might be useful in planning interventions, or making wholesale decisions about what is working for core instruction or large group intervention.

Teachers are treading on new and often unfamiliar territory with RtI. Not only are teachers required to be specialists in their content area, but they also take on more of a leadership role in creating high quality assessments, planning lessons around research-based strategies, collecting and analyzing student performance data, and identifying student behavior problems. In response, states such as Mississippi have partnered with their state universities to redesign their teacher preparation program to include training in creating assessments, collecting and analyzing data, identifying academic and behavioral issues, and creating action plans to treat identified problems (Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008). Many teachers are inexperienced in

collecting assessment data regarding skills such as decoding, reading fluency, and vocabulary, and need training regarding assessing a student's comprehension difficulties and providing intervention targeted to a specific deficit.

It is of interest to school leaders to identify what factors maximize the use of data in the decision-making process within schools (Anderson et al., 2010). Effective data use is contingent upon the accessibility of current data, the validity of the data, the staff's ability to collect and examine data, time to analyze data, and tools to collect, analyze, and report data (Anderson et al., 2010). Who is involved in data use is also important. Researchers have shown that when one person is responsible for handling all of the data that data use has the lowest capacity for improving student outcomes (Bernhardt, 2004). However, when teams work collegially to analyze data, the effect on student achievement is notable (Anderson et al., 2010; Bernhardt, 2004). Other factors that improve the effect of data use in the decision-making process include inviting experts into the data discussion, including longitudinal data in the analysis of improvement, and varying the context of the data use (Anderson et al., 2010).

Anderson et al. (2010) conducted a study of data use in middle and secondary schools and found that while ample data is available to principals and teachers, most principals participate in a very limited examination of data that has the potential to drive needed school improvement. The researchers found that many principals were guilty of handing the data off to the teachers to use. The researchers also discovered that only a small portion of principals and teachers used data to engage in problem solving discussions. Many school leaders participated in a shallow examination of data to identify general areas of weakness such as subgroup gaps or subject deficiencies, but did not progress to identifying the root cause behind the deficiency (Anderson et al., 2010).

There are many available approaches to tracking progress data under RtI. Mississippi school leaders have noted that they experienced a trial and error period when transitioning from a paper-based data tracking system to a computer based system (Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008). Fisher and Frey (2011) describe a high school study of RtI described a situation in which teachers at one school developed a competency based grading system in response to a large number of failures due to student's failure to complete their work. Teachers met to identify what topics were most important, developed a set of competencies to assess, and then allowed any student who made below 70% or wanted to improve their grade on a competency to retest given they had completed all of their other assignments for that competency. While some teachers had difficulty coming to a consensus, they were delighted in their ability to make decisions based on student data, and see an improvement in the number of failures.

When used effectively, faculty can use school data to identify needs and justify plans for focused improvement. The potential of data use to improve student achievement is dependent on some external factors such as the alignment of assessments to the goals and vision of the organization. Additionally, data has very little power when the examination of available data involves few data points and is concentrated to a surface examination of few types of data. Districts can improve their data use by engaging in a collaborative examination of multiple types of interrelated data, and then acting upon the data analysis by participating in a problem-solving session to create an action plan for improving instruction and student outcomes (Anderson et al., 2010).

Conclusion

The implementation of RtI requires a multifaceted whole school change (Dulaney, 2012). Several key factors are instrumental to the successful implementation of RtI. These include:

implementing RtI in phases, allowing multiple years for implementation and staying with the process, collaboration among departments, and providing continuous training and evaluation of progress (ALSDE, 2009; Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008). At the core of implementation lies extensive guidance and support from school administrators. This study set out to examine how one case is successfully implementing RtI, and what leadership characteristics promote successful implementation. Chapter 3 discusses the methodology used to conduct this research.

CHAPTER III. METHODS

Introduction

This chapter describes the research methods of this study. This chapter consists of the following sections: (a) purpose; (b) methodology; (c) design; (d) participants; (e) data collection; (f) analysis; and (g) the assumptions and limitations of the study.

Purpose

Since the inception of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), school leaders are moving toward a model of early identification and intervention to address the needs of all students rather than take a wait to fail approach to address the needs of a select group of students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Martinez, Nellis, & Prendergast, 2006). Schools who previously used an IQ discrepancy model to identify learners with disabilities are implementing the Response to Instruction framework (Berkeley et al., 2009). The State of Alabama has subsequently joined the movement and created a guide, Core Support for All Students (ALSDE, 2009), which outlined RtI implementation for Alabama schools. This mandate ensures that all Alabama students received researched based instruction tailored to their individual needs in order to improve outcomes for students of all levels (ALSDE, 2009).

RtI was designed to target students for early intervening services in hopes of reducing the number of students erroneously identified for special education services (Berkely, et al., 2009, Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), and to reduce the achievement gap between students through progress monitoring and differentiated instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Martinez, Nellis, & Prendergast, 2006). While research has shown the individual components of the RtI model to be successful, it is difficult to examine the implementation of the RtI model in its entirety due to its complex nature (VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007). Additionally, researchers have found that

there is an out crying by school leaders declaring a need for additional research regarding what factors lead to the successful implementation of RtI in the secondary school setting (Sansosti, Noltemeyer, & Goss, 2010, Sawyer, Holland, & Detgen, 2008).

The lack of research guiding the implementation of RtI has left many educators guessing at the best approach to implementation. A lack of guidance combined with the higher order systemic change required by RtI has made its implementation a daunting task for many school administrators (Sansosti, Noltemeyer, & Goss 2010). As a result, there exists a definite need for researchers to explore the conditions that lend themselves to successful implementation of RtI and findings that provide a basic model that can guide school leaders as they work to mold RtI to fit their specific situation (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009).

The goal of this study was to explore how one school implemented an RtI program, and what leadership characteristics promoted a capacity for organizational change within the school. The researcher examined the benefits and challenges faced by the school administrators and teacher leaders in order to identify the key instructional leadership factors that influenced the program.

The research questions in this study include:

1. How is one Alabama secondary school interpreting the RtI framework and putting its practices into place?
2. What are the enabling factors that allow this school to implement RtI?
3. To what extent do the practices of the school administration relate to RtI implementation?

Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative case study approach to examine the implementation of RtI in a single Alabama secondary school. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined a case study as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system (pg. 40).” According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a bounded system is a single unit or body that is contained by a set of borders. In this case, the bounded system is the RtI process at a single Alabama secondary school, and each individual participant experience with RtI implementation formed nested cases that make up the single-process case (Patton, 2002). A case study is well suited to such a situation where the researcher seeks to paint a descriptive picture of complex phenomenon with multiple embedded variables (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The case study method provided an in-depth exploration into the critical factors that contributed to the implementation of RtI in one Alabama school. The purpose of the study was to examine the meanings of the participant experiences that occur during the implementation of RtI, and use a cross-comparison of participant experiences to explore how those experiences shed light on the qualities that help implementation. An analysis of participant experiences, combined with the analysis of pertinent documents, identified the methods that resulted in positive participant experiences during the implementation process.

Position of the Researcher

In qualitative research the researcher serves as the key instrument in the process of data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), thus it is important to examine the position of the researcher within the study. The researcher can serve as an outsider and examine data from the etic or emic perspective, therefore, the background of the researcher plays an important role in the analysis of data. The etic view of a group or culture, is the view as an outsider looking in, while the emic view is the perception as an individual within the cultural group (Merriam, 2009).

My perspective as an insider is through the lens of a fellow educator with hands on experience in RtI implementation at the secondary level. I have served as a secondary level educator, an RtI coordinator, and the primary administrator of a non-traditional school for students who seek credit advancement or credit recovery. This experience provides an emic perspective into Alabama's RtI model, and the trials and triumphs associated with its implementation. With such experience comes valuable knowledge to draw upon when collecting and analyzing data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) pointed out that the researcher will inevitably relay personal meanings from their own background when narrating a case study, and therefore it is important to consider the background of the researcher.

In the context of the study I also served as an individual outside of the cultural group. While I had preconceived notions about what I expected regarding RtI implementation, being an outsider-researcher prevented me from having any preconceived notions about the specific participants in the study. However, as an outsider-researcher, the participants may have been reluctant to share privy information or be completely forthcoming when talking about sensitive information. As a result, it was necessary to build relationships and gain the trust of the study participants so they would be willing to share truthful and accurate information. The initial collection of observation notes, documents, records, and physical artifacts provided the opportunity to meet with meet with research participants and begin forging relationships prior to conducting participant interviews.

Context

The site for this study is an Alabama secondary school located in a city in east central Alabama. The city has a population of approximately 26,000 (2010 United States Census Data). The city was once home to a booming textile industry making it an industrial powerhouse in the

1980's. Through the 1990's many industrial jobs were moved overseas, but the 2000's began a turnaround in employment opportunities as many automakers and retail locations have taken residence in the city. The city has a very diverse population made up of 51.2 percent white, 43.2 percent Black or African American, 2.4 percent Asian, 1.9 percent two or more races, less than 1 percent native American, native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander, and 1.2 percent other races. The majority (94.1%) of the population speaks only English, 3.22 percent speak Spanish, 1.8 percent speak Asian and Pacific Island Languages, and 1.8 percent speak other languages.

Approximately 50% of the city's population makes less than \$40,000 per year and the median age of the city's residents is 35.5 years of age.

The school district is comprised of three primary schools that feed to three intermediate schools, 1 middle, and 1 high school which all students within the district boundaries attend. The mission of the school system is to *Educate every child every day*, through a system of the following beliefs:

- All students can learn and are capable of achieving high goals.
- Each student is a valued individual with unique physical, social, emotional, and intellectual needs.
- Students need to develop a deep understanding of essential knowledge and skills. They also need to develop the capacity to apply their learning, to reason, to solve problems, and to produce quality work as they become contributing members of society.
- A safe and supportive learning environment promotes student achievement.
- The success of our school system depends on the commitment of all stakeholders including administrators, teachers, support staff, parents and community to high quality standards, expectations, and quality performance.

- The development of the curriculum, the design of instructional activities, and the use of assessment measures are focused on providing learning opportunities and feedback systems that enable students to achieve success.

Situated in the heart of the city, the current campus for Maple High School (MHS) (pseudonym) was established in 1972. MHS currently serves approximately 1300 students in grades 9-12 and is ranked in the top 30% of Alabama schools in regards to diversity of its student population. The graduation rate of MHS remains above 90%, and the student population consists of 60% African American, 32% Caucasian, 7% Hispanic, and 1% Asian. Nearly 60% of the student population is eligible for free and reduced lunch. The staff of MHS consists of a Principal, three Assistant Principals, an Instructional Resource Teacher/ Instructional Coach, three counselors, and 87 certified teachers.

The RtI program at MHS has been in place since the State mandated its implementation in 2009, however in 2017 changes were made to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the process. One of the three assistant principals were selected to spearhead the changes to the program, and she began to establish a team of teacher leaders to serve as the problem-solving team (PST).

Site and Participant Selection

A purposeful sampling technique was used to identify the site and participants for this study. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined purposive sampling as the process of selecting participants and research sites based on the assumption that the researcher wants to understand a particular phenomenon and therefore must select a sample that will lend valuable information about the selected phenomenon. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of the following staff members: (a) Administration responsible for RtI

implementation, (b) Instructional Resource Teacher/ Instructional Coach, and (c) teaching staff who are involved in data collection, data analysis, and intervention decision making. I used prior experience and knowledge to select participants that could contribute valuable information regarding the topic of the study.

Site Selection

The site selected was a single secondary school in the state of Alabama. I chose a school in Alabama for both convenience and intrinsic interest. I have served as a secondary educator in the State of Alabama for the full length of my career, and therefore have a designated concern for the educational issues in Alabama secondary schools. RtI has proven to be a challenge at the secondary level, and given my experience at the secondary level I have an intrinsic interest in learning more about the implementation of RtI at the secondary level. Additionally, I wanted the site of study to have a diverse student population, and be representative of a majority of secondary schools in the State.

The International Review Board (IRB) granted permission to conduct this study in the State of Alabama (Appendix 1). I sent an email to the Superintendent and Principal of the school asking for participation, and explaining the details of the study. After obtaining site authorization (Appendix 2), I scheduled a time and date to meet with the school Principal to further discuss the details of the study, and schedule the initial collection of observation notes, documents, records, and physical artifacts.

Participant Selection

Participant selection criteria included at least one year of direct involvement in the RtI process within the school and a willingness to participate in the study. Participants involved in the direct implementation of RtI have the ability to provide valuable data about the RtI process

for detailed analysis. Participants invited for participation included the administrator over RtI implementation, the Instructional Resource Teacher/ Instructional Coach, and fifteen classroom teachers directly involved in the implementation of RtI. I obtained the assistant principal's consent (Appendix 3) to participate during the first meeting. During the initial site visit, I met with the assistant principal who serves as the administrator over RtI implementation and we compiled a list of teachers who were directly involved in RtI implementation and data collection. I sent a letter requesting participation and explaining the purpose of the study and its confidential nature to the RtI coordinator and each teacher that was directly involved in RtI implementation according to the assistant principal. Thirteen teachers indicated that they were willing to participate in the study, signed consent forms were obtained (Appendix 3), and individual interviews were scheduled during the teacher's planning time, in the teacher's classroom. Participants had variances in level of experience, job title, and job requirements, which can prove valuable in identifying meaningful patterns across individual cases (Patton, 2002).

Data Collection

The overarching focus of this case study was to examine the nature of the organization that is implementing RtI. For this study, data came from five sources as outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016): (a) interviews, (b) participant/direct observations, (c) public documents, (d) archived official records, and (e) visual documents. The purpose of data collection is to answer the questions presented by the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I selected types of data that would likely contribute valuable information to answer the research questions. Table 3 below, lists the types of data included in this study, and its contribution to answering the research questions.

Table 3 Type of Data and Contribution to Study

Type of Data	Example(s)	Purpose (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016)
1 hour Interviews with the option for follow up questions	Administrator Interview Instructional Resource Teacher Interview Teacher Leader Interviews	Individual interviews add insight into how the organization works, why it works, and what type of climate exists at a school that is successfully implementing RtI.
Participant/Direct Observations	Observation of RtI Meetings/ Problem Solving Team Meetings/ Data Meetings	Observations provide evidence of the leadership traits of participants.
Public Documents	Meeting Agendas RtI Documents	Document analysis are used to explore organizational structure, protocols, etc.
Archived Official Records	Student Achievement Data Problem Solving Team Data Building Layout Budget Records pertaining to RtI resources	Archival records in the form of student achievement data serve as a measure of success for the system.
Visual Documents	Student Work Samples/Photographs/Videos	Visual documents serve as evidence of the climate and culture of the organization.

Initial data collection involved the collection of public documents, archival records, visual documents, and open observations. The initial data collection provided a preliminary picture of the structural processes of the school. The initial data collection also provided an opportunity to meet with research participants and begin forming relationships with the participants. Findings from initial data collection and information from the literature review delivered the information needed to develop a semi-structured interview protocol for the second phase of the study. A semi-structured interview protocol involves using a flexible approach where neither the exact wording nor order of questions is predetermined (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Instead, the interview is allowed to be emergent, and the researcher has the flexibility to adapt the interview protocol as the situation allows. The researcher's major professors reviewed the initial protocol, and the resulting feedback informed the development of the final interview protocol.

Data from the interviews provided insight into the participant's perceptions of the RtI process. School leaders and teacher leaders that were involved in the RtI process provided information into how their perceptions of the RtI process compared with one another. Participants for the interviews included: the administrator over RtI Implementation, Instructional Resource Teacher/ Instructional Coach, and thirteen teachers that directly participate in RtI intervention and data collection. Each interview session took approximately forty-five minutes, and was conducted privately in the teacher's classroom, digitally recorded, and then later transcribed. Interview participants reviewed interview transcriptions to conduct a member check and clarify any misinterpretations.

Throughout the interview, I took notes regarding anything that stood out as being pertinent to the research questions. This included notes about setting, body language, unusual

responses, or simple clarifying remarks for transcription. Immediately after each observation and interview, I set aside time to review notes and make clarifying adjustments or reflective statements. A reflective audit trail served as a chain of evidence, and provided a record of initial thoughts regarding each piece of collected evidence. Each reflective audit trail entry contained the date of the activity, an annotated bibliography for the piece of data, and a reflection about the piece of data. Digital folders kept a digital copy of all data organized in an online database, and tabbed binders separated the hard copies of data into categories based on the type of data.

Data Analysis

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that “a qualitative design is emergent (pg. 195).” Meaning that while a review of current literature on the topic can reveal some initial categories, many emerge throughout the data collection process. In this study, data were first analyzed using open coding to identify initial categories, and subsequent data either fit into existing categories or warranted the creation or emergence of new categories as data collection and analysis progressed. As outlined in Merriam (2009), qualitative data analysis is “inductive and comparative” (pg. 175). It is inductive in that researchers take an exploratory approach that begins with examining specific observations for recurring themes or ideas in order to form general conclusions from the data. Furthermore, qualitative data analysis is comparative since data collection and analysis occur concurrently throughout the progression of the study, and categories or themes are revised as new data dictates.

Merriam (2009) defined a unit of data as a segment that contributes to answering the research question(s), and should be the smallest segment of information that can lend meaning to the study without additional information. Data analysis began with a review of literature relevant to RtI implementation, and the development of a priori codes informed by the literature. A priori

codes derived from the review of literature included improving instruction, relationships, positive support, providing resources, and communication and trust.

Data analysis continued with an examination of observation notes, documents, records, and physical artifacts with the intent of identifying units of data that could answer the research questions. The initial pass through the data allowed me to become familiar with the material, and expand upon the initial code list, with code definitions, to maintain consistency for future coding. A second pass through the data allowed for a more in-depth examination in search of specific bits of data that fit into existing categories or that warranted the creation of a new category. With each pass through the data, notes and comments were recorded in the margins where applicable. Additionally, a reflective audit trail allowed me to keep a detailed record of data collection events as well as reflective notes throughout the open coding process. Axial coding followed open coding, which involved grouping open codes into related categories and recording these categories into the reflexive audit trail.

Interviews took place after an initial coding of observation notes, documents, records, and physical artifacts. Information gleaned from the initial analysis of data shaped the interview protocol. To analyze interview transcriptions, I utilized viewpoints from both an etic and emic perspective, which allowed unexpected ideas to emerge, while still maintaining a connection between existing theory and the data collected during the study (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). I wrote down words or phrases that summarized ideas found in the data, and then separated and sorted coded data into conceptual categories. Consistent with the constant comparative design, categories and themes were refined using a recursive approach to re-examine data (Merriam, 2009). Data analysis and coding continued until no additional codes emerged. As Merriam (2009) explained, a model is a useful tool for finding the relationships that connect categories or

themes. I selected a profile matrix to analyze the relationships between the categories developed from the data (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Interactions and behaviors involving school staff made up the first column of the matrix, the second column indicated whether the behavior had a positive or negative influence on the implementation of RtI, the third column listed the source of the excerpt of data, and the final column listed the details of the interaction (Table 4).

Table 4 Interactions and Behaviors

Behavior	Effect (+/-)	Data Source	Interaction Notes
Building Relationships	+	Interviews, Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers meet one on one with students Students go out of their way to say hi and check in with teacher during observations Teachers comment that relationships with students have had a great impact
Positive Attitude & Interactions	+	Interviews, Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers share student success during PST meeting Administrators and teachers interact in a caring manner during observation Students act positively to teacher requests during observations
Offers Assistance	+	Interviews, Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrators offer to help teachers complete tasks Teachers ask administrators for help Teachers ask clarifying questions during PST meeting
Participates in the Process	+	Interviews, Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrators participate in PST process with teachers and can answer questions for teachers from their perspective Teachers respect that administrators are willing to help

Validity and Reliability

“All research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner” (Merriam, 2009, p. 209). One method to enhance reliability in qualitative case study

research is the examination of multiple forms of data for a convergence point, known as triangulation (Merriam, 2009). Table 5 summarizes how the multiple forms of data collected in the study may strengthen the validity of the study. In addition to triangulation, member checking was also used to strengthen the validity of the study, and served to affirm that the case study description in phase I, and the interview interpretation in phase II were accurate representations of the data. In the member checking process, participants reviewed the analysis of their responses, and gave a response to the accuracy of the analysis (Merriam, 2009). Finally, a reflective audit trail allowed the researcher to keep a detailed record of data collection events as well as reflective notes about each subsequent data analysis. The audit trail not only serves as a reminder of data collection events, but also allows others to validate the findings of the study by giving a detailed account of data collection and analysis (Merriam, 2009).

Table 5 Data analysis summary

Research Questions	1* Phase of Study	Data Collected	Analysis Strategy
1. How is a single Alabama secondary school interpreting the RtI framework and putting its practices into place?	Phase I	1. procedural documents <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • handbook(s) • meeting minutes a) direct observations b) field notes c) work samples	a) Theory Related Examination of Material b) Analysis from emic & etic perspectives c) Open Coding
2. What are the enabling factors that allow this school to implement RtI?	Phases I & II	Culmination of Phase I & II data	Overlapping congruence of data between phase I & phase II
3. To what extent do the practices of the school administration relate to RtI implementation?	Phase II	a) teacher leader interviews b) administrator interviews c) direct observations from faculty meetings, walkthroughs, problem solving team meetings	a) Open & Axial coding b) Use of a data matrix c) Use of a process model

Assumptions

This study employs the following assumptions:

1. The participants' actions during observations were consistent with their native behaviors when the researcher was not present.
2. The field notes gathered from observations accurately depict the environment and actions that existed within the school setting.
3. The participants answered truthfully during interviews.
4. The researcher asked the same interview questions in the same manner.
5. Student data accurately depicts student knowledge and progress.

Limitations

The strengths of the study include an intense focus on one school, and direct contact with the participants closest to the implementation of RtI. However, the study has several limitations. One such limitation is that qualitative research does not typically aim for generalizability but rather transferability. Therefore, stakeholders from other schools may be able to analyze the findings of the study and determine whether the information is applicable to their situation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Second, readers cannot speculate that a change in student achievement was solely due to RtI implementation. It remains possible that there are extraneous factors that may influence achievement. However, participant viewpoints and explanations can provide information that is relevant to future implementation of RtI. Third, the researcher had no previous relationship with the school faculty or administrative staff. As a result, there is the possibility that faculty could have been reluctant to share intimate details of their perceptions and thoughts regarding RtI implementation and its success. This may have limited the researcher's

access to privy information. However, the researcher's lack of previous involvement in the school reduces the likelihood of bias affecting the researcher perception. Member checking, external reviewers, and an audit trail aided in minimizing bias to the greatest extent possible.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 is a detailed description of data collection and analysis. In phase one the researcher used observation notes, documents, school records, and visual artifacts to create a description of the structural processes that occur during the implementation of RtI. In phase two, the interview data collection and analysis describes how leadership behaviors influence the implementation process. Constant comparisons between the multiple forms of data will search for overlapping themes and ideas to explore how structural processes and leadership behavior merge to create an environment that is primed for the second order change required by RtI implementation. The following chapters discuss the findings of the study and discuss the implications they have on future implementation and research.

CHAPTER IV. FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the implementation of RtI in an Alabama secondary school, and identify the quality factors that help facilitate successful implementation. The researcher examined teacher perceptions of the RtI process and the role that school administration played in supporting their teachers in the application of interventions. This chapter presents the findings of the study.

Context

Response to Intervention is a three-tiered approach to intervention, initiated in the State of Alabama in 2009. Tier I is composed of at least eighty percent of your student population and consists of general daily instruction. Tier II is the first level of intervention, and is reserved for students who are beginning to struggle which should be no more than the suggested fifteen percent of the student population. Tier II students receive intervention for math, reading, or behavior either as pull out, or as small group in the classroom setting, and may be delivered by the general education teacher. Tier III is the most intensive level of intervention for students that are not responding to Tier II intervention efforts, and is delivered by an instructional specialist outside of the general education setting. According to State guidelines, Tier III should comprise no more than five percent of the student population. RtI utilizes a problem-solving approach, or a Problem-Solving Team (PST), to select and place students in the appropriate tier (ALSDE, 2009).

Participants

The purpose of this study was to use a qualitative case study approach to examine the participant's experience with the implementation of RtI, and explore how they shed light on the

factors affecting implementation. The site hosts a principal, three assistant principals, three counselors, an instructional resource teacher/instructional coach, and 87 certified teachers. The PST consists of eight teachers, the instructional resource teacher/coach, and is led by the assistant principal. Of the 87 certified teachers, the assistant principal identified fifteen teachers that were directly involved in RtI implementation through participation in the PST and/or responsible for delivering classroom intervention. Of the fifteen teachers, thirteen agreed to participation, seven of which were teachers that served as both interventionists and PST members. A diverse group of participants was desired for the varying perspectives from which they may view the implementation process. Participant experience ranged from one to twenty-five years, and teachers were selected from all four core subjects and elective classes. For the purpose of this study, pseudonyms were used to maintain the confidentiality of the site and its participants.

Data Collection

Data sources for this study included documents related to RtI implementation, student achievement data, observation notes, and participant interviews. During the first site visit I observed a PST meeting. Prior to the observation, each PST member was provided an informed consent to participate in the study. During the observation, I recorded notes as outlined by my observation protocol. Following the PST meeting, I met with the assistant principal to discuss the structural processes MHS uses to implement RtI. The assistant principal provided a school handbook, bell schedules, longitudinal data for RtI for the last three years, the PST parent letter, the list of suggested interventions for teachers, a sample student evaluation form, and a sample standards mastered sheet. Following the site visit, I analyzed the documents and reflected upon my observations. Initially, I planned to follow up my site visit with a focus group interview,

however the majority of the participants had difficulty scheduling a common session due to coaching or personal obligations. As such, I decided I could glean the same information from individual participant interviews. I used the information I gathered during my site visit to inform my interview protocol, and prior to each interview, the participant was provided with an informed consent. The interview process consisted of fifteen interview prompts with room for clarifying questions to emerge as the participant's responses warranted. The questions focused on how RtI was implemented, the teacher's perception of RtI, and the factors that supported implementation at MHS. At the end of each interview, the participant was provided the opportunity to provide any additional comments they felt were pertinent to the implementation of RtI. Each interview was audio recorded and then later transcribed. Following transcription, the responses were reviewed, and reflective comments were recorded in the margins. After initial review, it was determined there was no need for any follow up questions or clarification from the participants.

Findings

The next few pages discuss the finding for this study. The findings have been organized by research question into three sections. The first section outlines how the RtI framework is interpreted and implemented at MHS. The second section explores the teacher's perceptions of RtI implementation at MHS, and what they view as strengths and weaknesses of the program. The final section examines the role that leadership plays in implementation.

Overview

Over the past three years, the RtI program at MHS has grown to meet the diverse needs of its students. The Problem-Solving Team (PST) has restructured the documentation process to make it more efficient for teachers, and added a mentoring component to provide emotional and

behavioral support for students. Alabama's RtI framework spends significant time focusing on academic intervention, however, the teachers at MHS noticed that academic deficits were not the primary issue they were facing. As discussed in the literature review, the implementation of RtI at the secondary level has proven relatively difficult, and time, resources, and ambiguity in participant roles can all be barriers to implementation. The current RtI framework addresses Math and Reading, but fails to address student motivation. The PST model at MHS incorporates a mentoring approach to help support students through the development of meaningful relationships between PST case managers and their students in an effort to boost student motivation.

The RtI Framework

MHS has taken advantage of the school's ability to determine how to deliver intervention per Alabama's RtI framework (ALSDE, 2009). In 2017, a new assistant principal was hired and given the task of improving the existing RtI program. The renovation was prompted by a lack of effectiveness, and an outdated and inefficient documentation process. Over the last three years the PST has implemented, evaluated, and revised their plan and continues to fine tune their processes to maximize effectiveness. MHS focuses their intervention efforts primarily on incoming ninth graders and low achieving tenth graders. The rationale behind focusing on the two lowest grade levels is based on intensively trying to focus resources to identify and catch struggling students early and help build a foundation of skills to help them be successful in the later grades. The teachers seem appreciate this approach, one stating:

Just from what I have seen, this is probably the most purposeful way of targeting those kids that don't have IEP's and 504's. This is really trying to target those kids that are struggling, purposefully, and I think a lot of times I've taught kids in 11th and 12th, and if

they had something in ninth and tenth they may not be dealing with some of the same issues.

Another teacher added:

I have always thought your junior year was the hardest year and so like how awesome to leave tenth grade PST and kind of be like ok this is what I need in the classroom and being able to communicate that heading into their last two years.

The PST's focus on ninth and tenth graders does not mean that MHS does not provide continued support for juniors and seniors. These students still receive mentoring from their Academic Opportunity (AO) teacher, counselors, and classroom teachers. Several teachers expressed how they use their RtI intervention strategies beyond their PST students. For example, one teacher stated, "if there is a kid in my class that is struggling, even if they are not on PST, I can use the same strategies to help them get past whatever standard they are struggling with." Another teacher noted that, "we do a lot of those similar strategies and they will be familiar with that moving onto the next grade." Through the implementation of RtI, MHS teachers have developed this culture of helping students on an individual basis.

Effective and efficient structural processes are key to effectively helping students achieve positive outcomes. The four main structural components of the RtI process at MHS include the Problem-Solving Team (PST), the referral and screening process, progress monitoring, and scheduling. The RtI Framework was organized into these four components based on the frequency with which these four categories appeared in RtI literature combined with their prevalence during data collection and analysis. The following sections will discuss the four components that make up the RtI program at MHS, and how they are implemented.

The Problem-Solving Team. MHS utilizes a problem-solving approach to RtI implementation. Members of the PST are selected by the assistant principal. While all MHS teachers are asked if they would like to volunteer, the final selection of team members is carefully selected by the assistant principal. During the interview process, several participants commented on the ability of the assistant principal to select PST members that were especially gifted at connecting with the at-risk students, forming relationships with the students, and being able to motivate reluctant learners. One participant commented, “we have one administrator, the AP, that is over PST as a whole, and she is great at identifying and helping encourage both students and PST members.” The assistant principal states that she looks for teachers that make connections with their students, and can motivate individuals. It is worth noting that half of the PST members are athletic coaches, two of which teach elective classes. Many schools tend to rely heavily on math and reading teachers, the ALSDE places emphasis on intervention in math and reading (ALSDE, 2009), but MHS has found great value in bringing in teachers with varying backgrounds and levels of experience. The athletic coaches that serve on the PST are able to bring their experience of motivating students on the field, into the classroom. The football coaches hold study hall for their athletes, and having a coach serve on the PST helps bridge those resources. One participant noted, “with the football players and study hall, we use some of those [PST] strategies, and even use some of them with the students that aren’t on PST.”

The PST at MHS is composed of eight classroom teachers, the instructional resource teacher, and the assistant principal who organizes implementation. The demographics of the classroom teachers that serve on PST range from core academic teachers to elective teachers, both males and females, and includes several individuals that coach athletic teams. The years of experience of the team members range from four years of teaching experience to fifteen years of

teaching experience. The assistant principal has nine years of teaching experience and two and a half years of administrative experience. The instructional resource teacher is a position specific to MHS and performs duties related to instructional coaching and curriculum specialist. She has seventeen years of teaching experience in English Language Arts.

The PST meets at least once a month and occasionally bi-weekly depending on the tasks that need to be accomplished. The assistant principal leads each meeting. During the meetings, the PST discusses what upcoming tasks need to be completed, and members bring forth any difficulties they may be having regarding student participation or implementation of the process. The members participate in open collaborative discussions and are not afraid to bring forth problems, ask for help, and provide guidance to each other. Individual student data is not the focus of the meetings, but rather next steps in the process, modeling what is expected, and troubleshooting difficulties with both student success and implementation procedures. Each problem is met with a solution by a team member.

Referral and Screening. Before the first progress reports are sent out, approximately three to four weeks into the first quarter, the PST sends an email to the ninth and tenth grade teachers requesting the names of any students that are failing, could be at-risk of failing, and would benefit from PST services. Teachers are instructed to use classroom grades, attendance, work habits, behavior, and their own knowledge of the student to make recommendations. Once a list of at-risk students has been compiled, the assistant principal and instructional resource teacher work together to validate that the students listed are in need of intervention by reviewing previous disciplinary records, standardized test scores, and attendance history. All ninth and tenth grade students participate in *Classwork's Scantron* Progress Monitoring for Math and Reading. *Classworks* creates a digital individualized learning plan based on the student's

Scantron results. Math and Reading teachers plan class time for students to work on their *Classworks* digital learning path.

All eighth-grade math students are given a pre-test at the end of the year, that was made by MHS teachers in conjunction with the Alabama Math, Science, and Technology Initiative (AMSTI), to screen students prior to scheduling and placement. Scores on the placement test are used to inform scheduling, and students' grouping in classes for the upcoming year. Algebra 1 classes are grouped into algebra 1 repeaters, those that will complete algebra in two semesters as algebra 1A and 1B, and then the more advanced students that will complete algebra in one semester. Algebra students are able to move from one group to the next as their progress dictates, and the lower level classes are staffed with a co-teacher to provide extra assistance for struggling students. All algebra 1 teachers have common planning that they use to discuss data, student placement, and suggest modifications to instruction or student placement, and they receive professional development hours for their time.

During the 2018-2019 school year, math teachers taught the same level group throughout the year. However, at the start of the 2019-2020 school year, it was decided that teachers would teach multiple levels of students and change groups after the first semester. This was done to prevent burn out, and administration states that teachers have been very pleased with the new model. The groupings of students receive mixed reviews from teachers as some like having all of the lower level students together with a co-teacher and find it easier to manage, while others feel that the lower level students perform better with a mix of more advanced students to work with. One teacher noted:

There are a lot of behavior problems in the lower level classes and I think it's a lot more difficult because I feel like when they are in a class where it is mixed, they are not on the same level as everybody else, so they know they can't act a certain way.

Once a list of students in need of intervention has been compiled, the PST divides the students into manageable caseloads of five to six students per PST team member. Generally, the assistant principal assigns students to each member's caseload, but team members have the flexibility to request a student they may teach, or may have a particular connection too. Once the PST members have been assigned their caseload, they send an email notification to each teacher that serves a student on their caseload, and include the standards mastered sheet, list of interventions, and student assessment form for the teacher to fill out over the course of the grading period. Throughout the grading period, the PST case manager will have a weekly face to face check in with the student, and monitor grades, behavior, and attendance. During the check in, case managers will pull students from an elective class with the teacher's permission, and discuss grades, help with makeup work, or even tutor the student if there exists a need for additional academic assistance.

Progress Monitoring. To monitor the progress of each student the classroom teachers are asked to check off each standard that the student masters for their class, using the standards mastered sheet (see Figure 2). Each standard is already listed for the teacher, and the teacher simply puts an "X" under the mastered or not mastered column for each student. The goal is that the student masters at least 70% of their standards on the standards mastered sheet. The teachers then turn in the standards mastered sheet by uploading it to Google Classroom, and the student's PST case manager tally's the student's information into a table. Additionally, the teacher is provided a list of interventions they may provide the student, and they are asked to highlight

which interventions they use, and submit is as an assignment through Google Classroom. If a student is failing, the teachers are required to submit two work samples for each standard that has not been mastered. Documentation is usually submitted every four and a half weeks, prior to progress reports and report cards. The PST members will often remind teachers of what needs to be submitted prior to each upcoming due date.

9th Grade World History	2010	
COS Standards	NOT MET	MET
World History: 1500 to the Present		
1.) Describe developments in Italy and Northern Europe during the Renaissance period with respect to humanism, arts and literature, intellectual development, increased trade, and advances in technology.		
2.) Describe the role of mercantilism and imperialism in European exploration and colonization in the sixteenth century, including the Columbian Exchange.		
3.) Explain causes of the Reformation and its impact, including tensions between religious and secular authorities, reformers and doctrines, the Counter-Reformation, the English Reformation, and wars of religion.		
4.) Explain the relationship between physical geography and cultural development in India, Africa, Japan, and China in the early Global Age, including trade and travel, natural resources, and movement and isolation of peoples and ideas.		

Figure 2 Sample Standards Mastered Sheet

Students are allowed three attempts at each assessment, and the math department gives common assessments that are developed by the teachers at MHS. Students are allowed to re-test during class, before or after school, or during their Academic Opportunity period. Additionally, to help provide positive support, students are rewarded for making progress and passing their courses with a field trip each quarter. One participant commented:

I actually had a couple [of students] that got to go to the zoo, and it is just Montgomery, but it was so fun for them and they were so excited. Just getting them out and getting to experience things outside of here. They are getting that opportunity to see that there is more than just this little community, and I think that kind of motivates them to do a little bit more in school that they see that, hey, maybe I can get out and actually have a goal to

strive for. Really, we are just trying to create an environment where they can be successful.

Scheduling. The MHS bell schedule is made up of four, ninety-six minute blocks. The school day starts at eight in the morning and the last class dismisses at three twenty-five in the afternoon. At the discretion of the district, MHS will have late start days, typically one each semester. On late start days, teachers report at their regular scheduled time, but students report to class at ten in the morning. The late start schedule allows teachers time to participate in professional development, collaborative planning meetings. During the 2018-2019 school year, MHS had five late start days, however, administration noted that “they were less effective because departments would only meet for fifteen minutes and be done.”

For the 2019-2020 school year, the late start days were cut to only two, but departments were given the opportunity to request a half day of common planning on any Tuesday, Wednesday, or Thursday of their liking. These half days must be used by the department for vertical alignment or common planning, and the school provides substitutes for each of the teachers. Administration noted that this worked much better because it was teacher requested, meaning they had taken the initiative to request it and plan for it. MHS administration had teachers requesting to meet and expressing, “we really need to meet with this person to see if we are all on the same page for our common assessments.” The instructional resources teacher provides an agenda and sign in sheet for these days, and participates in the meetings to provide support and ensure they are truly productive. Some items on the agenda include:

- Examine at the Depth of Knowledge (DOK) levels on our assessments.
- Where do we need to go next?
- What do we need to improve?

- What kind of new strategy do we need to incorporate?

The instructional resource teacher noted that “now that some of the teachers have met several times, we need to change the agenda because it is becoming less meaningful so we need to develop some new topics to discuss.” Teachers have a dedicated conference room to use for their meetings as well as duplicating equipment, note taking equipment, projectors, and snacks. The instructional resource teacher feels that having a prepared and dedicated space set up for the teachers helps prepare the climate for positive work sessions and collaboration. They talk about different strategies to incorporate, show each other what is working in their classroom, and discuss student growth.

Additionally, MHS incorporates an Academic Opportunity (AO) period into their bell schedule every Thursday. On Thursdays students report to first block as usual, but each block is only eighty-four minutes. Following first block, students report to their AO class for thirty minutes. AO is similar to a mentoring period where teachers check in with students about their grades, teachers will print grades for students, students have the opportunity to receive tutoring or make up missed work, and students may watch a video of announcements produced by the school news network. Additionally, the instructional resource teacher provides the faculty with a curriculum to use to guide teachers at mentoring students. The curriculum changes yearly, the 2018-2019 school year AO curriculum was based on teaching a growth mindset to teens. This year’s curriculum is based on a book study, and classes cover one chapter a week. AO helps ensure that no student falls through the cracks, there is always someone checking in on every student, and every certified staff member has an AO group, including administrators and counselors. Students keep the same AO teacher from ninth through twelfth grade. Having a mix of students in an AO class allows opportunities for the older students to help and give advice to

the younger students. One teacher said, “I like that it is a mix of grades. The freshman can get advice from the seniors. It’s cool to watch that relational thing. I had a freshman football player, and two seniors and it’s cool to watch that relationship.”

Teacher Perceptions of the Existing Framework

Overall, teachers feel that the current RtI model at MHS is very effective. The fifteen participants interviewed feel as though the majority of the teachers are very accepting of the process and open to trying new and innovative ideas. Ten participants noted that the biggest struggle facing PST students was truancy, nine mentioned motivation, and four mentioned both factors as being a major struggle that their PST students faced. All fifteen participants felt that the greatest benefit from the program was the relationships formed with the PST members that helped the students feel supported and encouraged. One participant summed it up the impact of PST by saying, “I think that shows them ok we care for them, and that we are not just standing in front of the class teaching thirty kids. I think that the individualization is really a big part of it.” The approach to RtI at MHS is a unique one. The general focus for RtI on the state level is on delivering intervention in math and reading. However, the administration and staff at MHS noticed that many of their at-risk students had the skills to perform academically but lacked the support and motivation to attempt their work. Therefore, the staff at MHS have taken a mentoring approach to providing intervention coupled with a focus on using research based strategies in the classroom, and pull out tutoring when needed.

The following sections highlight the participant’s perceptions regarding the benefits and struggles of the RtI program at MHS. The review of literature presented three primary benefits of RtI implementation: improving instruction, reducing special education referrals, and unifying the efforts of staff members. While the findings from the literature review and the study agreed on

the primary benefits of RtI implementation, the findings were not the same for the struggles faced by the teachers. The review of literature revealed that scheduling time, allocating resources, and defining participant roles were major barriers faced by teachers when implementing RtI. However, participants at MHS did not mention allocating resources and defining participant roles as major barriers to success. The following section reveals how the data collected aligns with findings from the literature review regarding the perceived benefits of implementation as well how teacher fulfillment emerged as an addition category during the analysis of interview data, and then examines struggles that participants at MHS perceived to be the greatest barriers to RtI implementation.

Benefits

A review of RtI literature highlighted three major benefits of RtI implementation: improving instruction, reducing special education referrals, and unifying the efforts of staff within the school. Overall, the staff surveyed perceived an improvement in each of these areas at MHS due to the implementation of RtI, in addition to other added benefits including added emotional and behavioral support for struggling students and greater teacher fulfillment. The following paragraphs share the benefits that MHS has experienced with the implementation of RtI.

Improving Instruction. The RtI process has had a definite impact on core classroom instruction at MHS. The PST provides teachers with a list of strategies to utilize for intervention, and many teachers noted that they used these strategies beyond their PST students to improve their general core instruction. One teacher specified, “I think reminding the teachers of strategies that are out there. It was even good for me to see, oh that is a strategy, you know and just having that list to refer to.” Another teacher added, “sometimes our kids could use just a little extra.

They are still studying the same content, same vocabulary, but they just needed something, a different path to get there and so it's just a good reminder I think." The teachers are highlighting the strategies they are using for the PST students, but observations and interview responses indicate that they are also using these strategies to benefit their general education students as well.

In addition to promoting high quality research-based strategies, the PST asks teachers to verify the standards that PST students have mastered using the standards mastered sheet. According to interview responses, using the standards mastered sheet has prompted good conversations. One math teacher declared:

It's accountability too for us, and it's made our team look through our lesson planning again and we need to check those off, so she and I have been meeting and trying to plan, ok, how are we teaching this and that? So, it's accountability I think for the teachers too.

Another teacher stated:

We really haven't met up in the past to make everything similar in all the classes, whereas this year we have, we have met up and we made common exams, we made certain worksheets, more conversations where I teach it this way, how do you teach it? So, that's been really great to just be able to see how does another teacher teach this?

Therefore, working through the standards mastery sheet has prompted teachers to really examine their standards and have conversations about aligning resources to those standards.

In addition to improving classroom instruction, every participant felt that the PST has had a positive effect on student achievement and behavior. As a student improves, they are moved to the on-watch list and then may be completely moved off of PST altogether. One teacher stated, "I had one kid who is in PST as a ninth grader and they did better as a ninth grader so he was

moved to the “on-watch” list for tenth grade.” The on-watch list reminds PST members to keep an eye on a student’s progress without the need for the PST member to actually meet one on one with the student. Many teachers notice that the extra support provided by PST gives the younger students that initial boost of confidence they need to move off on their own. One teacher recalled:

I started giving them accommodated tests like for our vocabulary tests, fewer options and you could tell that they had more confidence in it because they started to see some success once they did it, and it was just two extra copies that I had to make of my accommodated tests and I think that helped them a lot.

The teachers really enjoy seeing the success from students. One participant stated, “just seeing that and hearing some of those students who are struggling say hey I’m passing, or did you see my grade, so it’s really good to see them finally realize they can be successful.”

Additionally, every participant interviewed credited relationships as being the factor that they felt had the largest impact on students. One teacher stated, “I think the biggest thing is the relational side, balancing that making sure you are getting to know the kids and you have time to pull them, where it can be more productive.” In addition to supporting students academically, the PST team is also having an emotional impact on students. Students feel they have a person to go to. One teacher noted:

She knew that I was her PST person, so I think she felt more comfortable coming to me and asking me if she could go here and there, and you can tell once they’ve identified you, like they kind of see you in the hall, so I think it just kind of helps them identify you as a person that they can go to.

Teachers felt that having a person to seek out, and knowing that there is someone that cares helped motivate students to try harder. One participant noted:

It's definitely helping them pass their classes, someone else that they know cares about them, and wants them to succeed and they will see me coming down the hallway, and they will say, I know I need to get that up, and so I think that has been encouraging to them to know that there is someone here that really cares about them.

Another teacher added:

I think that they like feeling special and being treated like an individual. I think that when we show them that hey, we understand that you are struggling, we are doing something special for you, I think that makes them feel like, hey, they actually care that we pass, and that we get an education.

Several (4) teachers pointed out that the PST process alerted them to language barriers that they may otherwise missed. One teacher gave her account of learning that her student struggled to understand what was going on in class. She recounted:

I have one kid who is an ESL student and so, when I went to meet with him for the first time I learned that I had to set up a time to go to his ESL teacher and she had to translate. So even just realizing that this kid has no idea what we are saying even if it is just for me to say, hey, I am Mrs. Dixon. I feel like that helped him to know we care, and I think it helped bring the EL teacher into the process as well.

The staff at MHS is trying to keep the progress going by adding incentives for PST students. "I think [RtI] has helped with some behavior issues and they have this built in where if you make progress you get to go on these trips and I think you are giving some incentives and they do feel supported." PST students that are passing at the end of the nine weeks get to go on a

field trip, and the teachers believe this is a great opportunity for these students especially since many of them rarely get to leave their community. One teacher pointed out:

They do like the PST field trip or for ones that stay out of trouble and pass their classes each semester and that is great. I actually had a couple that got to go to the zoo, and it was just so fun for them that they got to go and they were so excited. Just getting them out, and getting to experience outside of here, they are getting that opportunity to see that there is more than just this little community. I think that kind of motivates them to do a little bit more in school, that they see that hey, maybe I can get out and actually have a goal to strive for. Really, we are just trying to create an environment where they can be successful.

The support for MHS students goes beyond just providing reading and math intervention. The PST at MHS has found a way to provide a more holistic approach to student support by extending the typical RtI model to provide a mentoring component to help motivate and support the PST students.

Improving the accuracy of Special Education Referrals. MHS has not officially documented how the RtI process has affected the number of special education referrals. As the administration notes, “very few students are referred at the high school level, most have been identified by the time they reach us.” However, the effect of PST on special education referrals has not gone unnoticed by the staff. One teacher noted:

[PST] is a good benefit because you see, well no this student really didn't need to be in special education, he just needed a little bit of motivation. It helps you prevent from just hopping in, you can see this student just needs a little extra, and then you can test the ones that once you've done everything that you can. I think it is a great tool for that.

Several teachers (8) commented on how the PST process has identified students that might have otherwise slipped through the cracks. One participant stated:

I found some that were on PST that I was like, oh, I didn't even realize that this child needed some extra help because I was thinking oh, maybe they were barely skimming by, but then they got put on PST so we were able to get to the root of the issue.

One benefit to referring students to PST prior to a special education referral is that they can be supported and receive assistance while they wait for the sometimes-lengthy evaluation process to be completed. One teacher commented, "you can put someone on PST instantly, but you know, getting them into special education takes some time. So, that at least gets them some accommodations until they can get the full special education accommodations that they need." Additionally, several participants felt that PST reduced the number of students that needed to be referred for special education testing because PST was able to serve their needs. One teacher noted that, "it could eliminate some of the actual special education needs as far as maybe these kids really do need a little bit of intervention, but they don't need the whole nine yards."

Last, the PST has had some unexpected benefits to special education students. One teacher highlighted a specific case where the PST team was able to support a student whose parent denied special education services. The teacher reported:

I know that there are some specific times that I felt that I had students that needed to have special education services and they actually tested that they could qualify but the parents denied those services. I think that one of them actually was put on PST, and because it wasn't special education services that the parents allowed their child to do that.

Because the special education label can carry a negative stigma, parents may be reluctant for their child to receive special services, however, they PST does not carry the same stigma and through the PST the student was allowed to get the help they needed to succeed.

Unifying the Efforts of Staff Members. One of the unintended consequences of the RtI implementation at MHS was the unification of efforts among the different aspects of the school learning environment. To best serve their students, the staff at MHS realized that it would take the resources of multiple departments to accomplish their goal. The PST has worked under the combined efforts of the classroom teachers, counselors, English as a second language teachers (ESL), and special education teachers. Quite often, the general education teachers can send PST students to the resource room staffed with a special education teacher to take assessments in a quiet environment. One teacher commented:

We have special education teachers that have resource each block. One thing that I offer to kids that are on PST is if they would like to go to a resource room to test, it is just a little more of a quiet environment to test, and if they feel a little bit better to ask questions and stuff they can do that.

It is a great student-centered partnership that benefits everyone involved.

Teachers also join with the ESL teacher to provide scaffolds and resources in a second language that the student can better understand. One teacher noted, “I always have felt like [ESL] is something that I wasn’t prepared for when I got my teaching degree, so working with the ESL teacher was beneficial for sure.” Another teacher commented, “It is good having [the ESL teacher] in there, and I think it kind of helped her feel more like she was helping the PST kids too.” Not only is the support is appreciated by the general classroom teachers, but it also helps the build working relationships among the staff that promote a positive climate and culture.

Even the athletic coaches join in on the collaboration by using some of the strategies during study hall for the student athletes. One teacher stated:

There have even been times when we've reached out to coaches, our football team does a great job in study hall. The minute that kid hits a C, they are in study hall and they are knocking out that stuff and we have had quite a few PST kids that it has helped them give them additional time to work.

The effect of the collaborative spirit of the teachers at MHS is exemplified in one participant's response, "I think if you have the right people in charge, you have a good team, you have good support, and administration behind you, it is amazing what can be accomplished and how well the kids can benefit from it."

Teacher fulfillment. Every PST member expressed the value they found in the relationships that they formed with the students on their caseload. One PST member commented:

I think it is really good, just to see how I have had this particular student doing really well and how when they first got into my class they were not really motivated and all over the place, and once you implement those strategies, they're very for it. Just seeing that and hearing some of those students who are struggling say hey I'm passing, or did you see my grade, so it's really good kind of see them finally realize they can be successful.

Another participant stated:

With the PST check ins, you have that one on one relationship, like hey, come to me for anything! Why are you missing this? What do you have to make up? What do you have to do? So, that's great, and you just get to know that student. They might talk to you about something at home, so, that's really great to see.

The relationships and seeing the student success is an intrinsic reward for teachers knowing their hard work is paying off. One participant commented on the overall attitude of the staff toward PST saying, “I would say the vast majority is open to doing whatever it takes to help our students. This is one of the hardest working staffs I have ever worked with, that actually cares and tries to help our students.”

Struggles

The review of literature revealed the biggest struggles faced by staff members implementing RtI included: scheduling time for paperwork, interventions, and planning, allocating resources, and defining participant roles. However, participants at MHS did not mention resources and participant roles as a major barrier to RtI implementation. The major concerns that MHS teachers face is managing the documentation process, differentiating between students that lack motivation versus have a true learning deficit, and a lack of a schoolwide knowledge of the PST vision. The following paragraphs discuss the struggles faced by MHS faculty implementing RtI.

According to the review of literature on RtI at the secondary level, one of the biggest struggles that teachers face when implementing RtI is finding time to implement intervention, complete the required documentation, and meet to discuss the needs of the program. In the past, the staff at MHS faced the same struggle and therefore turned their focus to making a more efficient process that served the needs of their specific students. One of the major changes the PST made was shifting the documentation process to a digital format using Google Classroom and utilizing pre-filled Google Forms and Documents that could be easily shared and edited. One of the PST members explained, “we would send the teachers, who had our students on PST, strategies and the standards mastery sheet, and it could be done through Google Classroom

which helped with the due dates and eliminating the amount of paper back and forth.” To reduce the amount of time that teachers spent filling out forms, all of the forms are pre-filled with the student’s information and all options are listed for the teacher. All that is required of the teacher is to highlight the strategies they use, or check yes or no for standards that the student has mastered. One teacher commented that she feels, “it is good documentation to say hey, I’m doing this, this, this, and this.” Another teacher reiterated the ease of the new forms by adding:

I think that this new way is easier, I think that every year we have gotten more efficient. I think that this is the easiest way because right now what we do is the standards mastered sheet on GC and they send it to us with the kid’s name attached and then they send the blank strategies sheet and you just go highlight the strategy you use in that child’s instance. I think that helps because you are not having to think back, its already laid out in front of you.

The new format receives mostly positive feedback from the participants (11) due to its simplicity, but some give it mixed reviews saying:

I think sometimes keeping up with that standards mastered sheet, it’s one more thing we have to do even though its paperless, it’s still like having to go in and do it, but I think once you have gone through a couple of cycles and you know then you it doesn’t feel like an added thing.

One participant feels that, “it’s just another piece of paperwork we have to do, and depending on the students and the PST members it can be seen as beneficial and helpful for the students.”

When asked about the need for training on the PST process, one teacher replied, “most of the paperwork is common sense it’s not where a lot of training is required.” However, several

participants saw it as unnecessary, stating that, “I think the staff likes it, they just don’t like the paperwork” and another added:

The weakness I believe is having to turn in those standards mastered all the time because that just adds another level of paperwork for the teachers. I really got more from my teachers by having a conversation with them, what’s this kid doing in class, what do you think the issue is, because they see them every day, and I got more from that.

Several participants (4) did not feel as though the benefits of the paperwork outweighed the effort and that getting to know the students, talking to them, and talking to their teachers were much more beneficial methods to evaluate the status of a student. One participant stated:

I think we need grades, and we need to see progress reports in detail. We can print detailed progress reports and teachers type notes in there which is so helpful, and those are more helpful than that standard mastery sheet. We just need to have more conversations.

Another teacher reiterated their perspective on the documentation process by stating:

I am just not sure, it is one of those things that I wish we didn’t have to document it, but if we didn’t then would we do it? It’s definitely going to be necessary, so I am just not sure what we could do better.

It is clear that the teachers are interested in finding the most efficient way to help their students, and while not everyone agrees on how to do it, they can all gather around the common mission of helping students succeed.

Another struggle that the PST at MHS faced was how to differentiate between students that have a true skill deficit and those that have the skills, but lack the motivation to work. One participant commented, “that’s the biggest weakness I have seen in our particular program is

there is no way to weed out the kids who are needing extra help from the kids that are just not caring enough.” While MHS has worked to help solve the motivation problem by building relationships and supporting the emotional needs of PST students, some participants (3) feel as though the two groups of students would be better served as separate efforts. As one participant said:

There are a lot of kids that are put on [PST], not because they are actually struggling, but because they just don’t want to try. I wish that there was something else that we could put them on besides PST because I really don’t think it’s an intervention issue, I think it is a motivation issue. So, if there was some other thing we could refer those kids to, so that the kids that are put on PST are seriously the ones that don’t have any true issue, but need extra assistance.

Even though the mentoring component has helped motivate some students, there still remains instances where it seems the school’s efforts are futile and some students seem impossible to reach. A lot of time these students leave a teacher feeling helpless. One teacher stated:

I let them turn in anything from the entire semester up until the end of the grading period for partial credit, they can do unlimited *Classworks* for extra credit, they are allowed to re-take tests. If you want to pass my class, you are going to pass my class. I have online resources for you to use so you can study at home, we have tutoring so you can come after school, we can pull you during school, if you want to pass my class, you are going to be passing my class.

In this case the teacher feels like they have exhausted every resource available to them, nothing works, and they feel like a failure. This can type of encounter can lead to burnout and a negative climate for teachers.

The Role of Leadership

Every participant at MHS stated that they felt supported by their school leaders. According to the participants, the MHS leadership is always there for support by asking what teachers need, filling in when teachers may need help, participating in the process alongside the teachers, and allowing teachers to lead and take direction. These actions have facilitated a positive climate and culture where teachers want to put their best forward and go out of their way to help students succeed. The following sections detail how the leadership at MHS has helped establish a positive climate and culture to support RtI implementation.

Positive Support. During my observation of the PST meeting, I observed the assistant principal and the PST members engage with each other in a receptive manner. The assistant principal commented, “it takes forty-five minutes to send out the required information to the classroom teachers, and I know you do not have that much time, so work to send it out incrementally and let me know if you need any help.” Her statement shows her compassion and understanding for the teachers and the work that they do. The instructional resource teacher also exemplifies the same caring qualities. During the meeting, she met some of the teacher concerns about printing documentation by inviting them to come to her and she would help them. One teacher noted, “they are both super positive people which is great! You don’t want these meetings to turn into a vent session about how we are not getting paperwork or something. Their positivity has helped us when we get bogged down.”

Not only are they involved in the PST process, but they are there to support general classroom instruction. One participant commented, “Our administration as a whole is very hands on, you see them, always in the classroom.” Another added, “we have a lot of, not just they want to see what we are doing, but they want to see how they can help us be more successful in the

classroom.” This shows that the teachers understand they are not in the classroom to inspect, but are there for support and they are involved in the day to day practices involved in curriculum and instruction. One teacher stated, “the administration, they kind of play a hand in it, keeping up, trying to see what strategies are working, what we are doing that works, and so that they can get the kids where they need to be.”

The school leaders also provide support with the implementation of new ideas and technology. One teacher stated, “this year they moved [PST] to Google Classroom and I know our assistant principal specifically has spent a lot of time making sure that it is manageable for all teachers in this school, available for all teachers in this school.” Another participant added, “the assistant principal sends out emails, she tries to stay on top of it, suggestions that you can do, this is what’s worked in the past. She makes sure that we know what to do.” The administration listens to teachers, genuinely want to help, and that shows the teachers that they care. One teacher noted, “if I went to her and said I have talked to this kid, maybe if you talk to this kid? She would pull them and talk to them. She’s been very involved, and it shows they care about it to.” Another added:

One thing I like is that if we have any questions or if we are running out of time at getting something done they will help. They are supportive. They know that myself, and the other coaches have multiple duties so they are very supportive and will say ‘hey, if you need any help with something and you get behind or whatever let me know and we can figure something out’, and they will help get everything paperwork wise to the teachers or emails being sent out.

The support from the administration has created a collaborative culture where all staff members work together to help students succeed. One participant stated:

We have one of our academic coordinators she's a part of the PST, counselors, so we have a lot of front office, or office staff, administrators that is a part of PST. So now it is not just important to teachers, but it's a group effort with the entire high school that, hey, we come together and we are going to try and figure out some of this for students together.

Participating in the process. Perhaps one of the most impactful characteristics of the leadership at MHS is their willingness to participate in the process alongside their teachers. One PST member stated, "our assistant principal has a bigger caseload, our guidance counselor has a bigger caseload, and our curriculum coach has a bigger caseload. They are doing it right there along with us. They just have pulled in a few more kids." Having administration participate in the process encourages teachers and creates a sense of teamwork. The teachers see it, and one responded, "it is good to know that she is out there helping us collect what we need and facilitate. I think her caseload is even bigger than ours is. She is doing it too, which I think has helped you know." Another added that, "even the principal has an AO class. It's a lot like a mentoring class." Not only do the participate in the process alongside the teachers, they are willing to go out of their way if someone needs help. One teacher commented:

They are very involved and they are willing to help you out if you needed. Like the instructional resource teacher covered my class so I could go meet with the ESL teacher to reach a kid. So, just being involved and positive has made it a really good experience, and it has made us want to help these kids.

Another added:

They think it's important. When it's important for them, and they're telling us that this is important that you do it. You are not just sitting there thinking they are just giving us more to do. They are doing it too, and they are working with me.

Seeing the administrative team work with the teachers and participate in what they are asking the teachers to do adds value to the task and motivates the teachers to want to do it.

An added benefit to the administrative team participating in the process is that they build valuable relationships with the students as well. One participant recounted:

They are always the ones that are there helping the students, and do field trips and stuff with them. The kids actually, it's funny, some of the PST kids that you would consider the more disciplinary challenged kids, they actually love the administration. I would have some times where they would go see the Assistant Principal or Instructional Resource Teacher just randomly throughout the day.

Another teacher added:

I think that one of the good things that they do is they take away the whole scary administrator, I'm here to scare you type situation, they take that away and they more say I am here to help you succeed, the kids I think like that. So, I think the kids feel real safe with them and I think that is really important.

Not only is the administration supporting teachers, but they are also building valuable relationships with the students.

Allowing teachers to lead and take direction. The teachers at MHS feel the school climate created by their leaders is conducive to innovation and that teachers are open to new ideas. One participant said, "I think we learn about so much, we do a lot of professional

development and everybody is so kind and open to it.” One participant attributes the staff’s attitude to school leadership by saying:

I think it comes from the top down, I think it is portrayed by the principal and assistant principals, its relayed to us, and it’s done so well that, we are able to be ourselves and thrive in that atmosphere and I think we just take ownership of our room as far as those kids learning and just making sure that we are on top of things, making sure that we are getting feedback, and just trying to create a positive environment for the kids.

It is clear to the teachers at MHS that the leadership is willing to help teachers grow their leadership capabilities. One way the teachers lead instruction is through collaborative planning meetings. One participant explains:

Teachers have the opportunity to request common planning with their department or grade level at any time throughout the year as needed. Instead of it being planned for the teachers, they get to choose when they need it and how often they need it, and they lead it.

This gives teachers the ability to have input in how instruction is delivered in their classroom. As one teacher stated, “we have input on what strategies we use, and what works” and another added, “they give us a lot of control over our classroom, the way we chose to do things. They also give us options to work with other people if we want to.”

Teachers have the opportunity to lead outside of the classroom as well. One teacher explains that she led a girl’s mentoring program in a previous district and stated that, “I really wanted to start it here, and instantly they were like if you want to do it, do it and that’s great and so they are very encouraging in terms of supporting you in what you do.” The administrative staff are supportive and encourage teachers to expand their reach. A participant stated, “they are

always encouraging us to do different things with them, and try everything they can to make sure they are successful.”

Conclusion

When implementing any program, it is important to evaluate whether the program works for your current situation. Not every aspect of a program will work for every situation and it is important that school leaders are able to discern what aspects of a program fit the needs of their school and adapt accordingly. Chapter IV discussed how MHS implements the RtI framework, the teacher’s perception of the process, and how the teachers perceive the school leader’s impact in implementation. Chapter V discusses the implications of the key findings of the research study, as well as recommendations for future practice and research.

CHAPTER V. SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

This researcher sought to examine the implementation of the Response to Instruction (RtI) program in an Alabama secondary school. RtI is an initiative mandated by the State of Alabama in hopes of providing a means to the early identification and continued support of struggling students, primarily in the areas of math and reading. This study used a qualitative case study approach to gain a descriptive picture of the multiple and complex facets that help support the implementation of RtI at the secondary level. The study examined the structural processes of the RtI program, and how a single Alabama secondary school interpreted the framework to meet the specific needs of the school. The study also investigated the teacher perception of its efficiency and effectiveness, and how teachers perceive the practices of the leadership to affect implementation.

The following questions guided the framework for the study:

1. How is a single Alabama secondary school interpreting the RtI framework and putting its practices into place?
2. What are the enabling factors that allow this school to implement RtI?
3. To what extent do the practices of the school administration relate to RtI implementation?

Discussion of Key Findings

The key findings for the study are discussed in the initial sections of this chapter, and are broken down into interpretation and implementation of RtI, the factors that were found to enable the implementation of RtI, and the factors that were perceived to inhibit the implementation of RtI. The final section of this chapter discusses the researcher's recommendations for future practice and research.

Transferability

According to Merriam & Tisdale (2016), transferability utilizes a thick description of the context so the reader can potentially apply the findings to their own situation. As was mentioned in Chapter 3, the primary goal of this study is to explore a single case of RtI implementation in an Alabama secondary school in hopes that practitioners may be able to apply the findings of this study to improve their own implementation of RtI. I approached the study with the expectation to find a heavy focus on reading and math intervention. This preconceived notion was due to my own personal experience as an RtI coordinator as well as through the examination of current literature. However, I was excited to discover much more. The examination of this case changed the focus of my own implementation from solely focusing on providing the best reading and math intervention possible, but also addressing the social-emotional needs of our learners that I may be overlooking.

Interpretation and Implementation

MHS staff noticed that their students were not getting what they needed in order to succeed, and so they began to investigate the root cause of their student's problems. During the interview process, every participant noted that they felt that many of the PST students did not exhibit skills deficits, but rather struggled with a lack of motivation to complete their work or a lack of support and value for education at home. Recent archival data indicate that 60% of MHS students are eligible for free and reduced lunch, and teachers report that they can see the impact the coming from a lower socioeconomic group has on students. One teacher noted:

You know, kids worry about that, we don't think they do, but they worry about, 'Am I going to have dinner when I get home?' So, some of those needs end up getting met once we become more aware. The kids that were on my caseload would tell me things and I

am like ‘we never knew we needed to help you,’ then we would go report it, and things would start to happen for them. So, you know, we are meeting needs from all sides.

Looking at the PST students on an individual basis has brought the teacher’s attention to some of the struggles they were unaware of before such as lack of internet access, inability to come to before or after school tutoring, etc. So, it has become much more than just a focus on math and reading. As the previous participant stated, the staff recognizes that they have to address student needs from multiple angles.

Not one teacher mentioned gaps in reading or math as the primary struggle that their students were facing. They stated that there were some students who could certainly use additional supports in math and reading, but most students were able to be successful in their coursework with only in class supports. However, reading and math supports did not solve the bigger overarching problem of students not being motivated to complete or turn in assignments. As one participant noted:

I don’t think it is lack of skill. I don’t have a single student that I would say its lack of skill. Each student is something different, so one student its absences, one student it has been a language barrier. So, I have advocated for that student in class and say are we differentiating for this particular student, and then another student it’s just been home life stuff.

Therefore, MHS has shifted its focus from the more mainstream interpretation of RtI where the focus is on delivering math and reading intervention to a more holistic approach to help meet the emotional needs of students. RtI, as it was implemented previously at MHS, did not provide a holistic solution to the struggles affecting today’s classrooms. One teacher noted, “sometimes it’s students that really don’t try, sometimes it’s students that have a hard time with understanding,

and some it's just some type of language barrier just like an ELL student or so. But that's pretty much PST." Teachers are incorporating every reading, math, and engagement strategy, communicating with students and parents in every way they know how, but were still falling short. To compound this problem, the feeling of failure and hopelessness that occurs when you fail to reach a student can lead to burn out and job dissatisfaction. Research has shown that teachers who feel a low level of success coupled with emotional exhaustion are likely to experience burn out and job dissatisfaction (Brunsting, Sreckovick, & Lane, 2014). So, what can be done to reverse this multifaceted problem?

Educators must find a way to support students in a more holistic manner. The focus must go beyond math and reading intervention, and address additional factors that are affecting students such as motivation and emotional needs. Studies have shown that just one caring adult can help contribute to improving the resiliency of an adolescent that has experienced some type of trauma or hardship (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015). Several participants commented that they saw behaviors change simply from providing a mentor, someone that cares. One teacher noted:

I think that is the biggest thing, someone caring that you succeed, not someone just putting you, hey why are you not doing this, why are you not doing that, but someone that you know genuinely cares about you then I think that within itself may help them try to do better. It's almost like you are letting mom and dad down, I have got to do well because I am going to let him or her down.

Another concurred, "it's been more like building a relationship with them. They work for me when they won't work for their teacher. I know that he trusted me with what is going on, It's not a skill thing." A third teacher added, "the more you can build that relationship, the more the kid

will work for you or they know that they have someone that cares about them and I think that's huge for those kids that need the intervention." For so long educators have worked to implement things that can be tracked, quantified, and are tangible, but people are far from these things. There are the innumerable, non-tangible issues that teenagers face in their day to day life. In a period where everything has to be concrete and documented, MHS has chosen to take a more personal, informal approach to helping students where PST students are assigned to a case manager and the case manager builds a relationship with those students. Research has shown that at the secondary level, increasing the number of positive student-teacher relationships can be a catalyst for improved student engagement (Martin & Collie, 2019). The teachers at MHS have realized the potential of fostering positive relationships with their PST students in hopes of improving academic engagement.

The PST case manager at MHS acts much like a mentor, forming a positive trusting relationship with their students and assisting the student in securing the resources necessary to be successful in the school setting. Those resources may be a counselor, ESL teacher, or it may involve the case manager gathering resources in the student's native language, collecting make up work, or helping the student schedule time to complete missed work. Research has shown that the mentoring relationship has the potential to evoke positive student outcomes in the school setting (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2014). At MHS, the case manager works in the mentoring role to help the student identify the barriers that inhibiting academic success, and assist them in overcoming those obstacles. Table 6 outlines the major barriers that the teachers at MHS perceived to have the greatest impact on student achievement, and what strategies the PST members implemented to help improve outcome for students.

Table 6 Major Barriers for PST Students

Barriers	Response of PST member at MHS
Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check in with students on a weekly basis. • Build a trusting relationship with PST students • Provide positive rewards and field trip opportunities for students • Provide positive verbal feedback for students • Help students set attainable goals for success
Attendance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reach out to parents regarding missed work and failing grades as a result of absences. • Remind students and parents to turn in excuses so that work can be made up. • Help the student collect make up work and pull students during an elective class to make up work. • Help students schedule times to meet with other teachers for tutoring or to complete make up work.
Language Barrier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize the ELL help line to interpret phone calls home • Provide work in the student’s native language • Work with the ESL teacher to provide support to the student
Skill deficit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide teachers with a suggested list of research based intervention strategies • Pull students during an elective time, with teacher permission, to work on specific skills or assignments

- Facilitate meetings for students to receive extra help or complete make up work

Enabling Factors

Building relationships. Relationships are an important part of the educational environment because positive student-teacher relationships can lead to increased motivation and willingness to work (Martin & Cole, 2019). The teachers at MHS identified a need for support beyond reading and math intervention that included a component to address student motivation. So, the PST developed a process where each PST student would have a case manager and that case manager would serve as a mentor to their PST caseload. The case manager's case is small, five to six students, so they can build quality relationships around the student's interests, goals, hobbies, and life happenings. One teacher noted:

I think my personal experience with that is they wanted to please me and they wanted to do well, and they wanted, really once I started checking on the I could see where their grades, the kids I had last year, their grades would start to go up and they would say, before I even asked, oh I am going to turn that in, or I haven't turned that in yet, but I've got it.

Another reiterated the point that providing individual attention in key by saying:

I think it is super important to understand that sometimes these kids are not in any type of loving environment. I think that along with the PST and the individualization, I think we can really enhance the learning environment and I think that's why a lot of those kids that are lower on the socioeconomic ladder are on PST. I think that is why a lot of them have

seen so much progress because we do give them that individual attention that they may not be getting anywhere else.

This viewpoint can be problematic because it is disparaging to parents by assuming that a student is in an unloving environment. Rather than focus on the factors that cannot be controlled, it is more productive to focus on the factors that educators can use to make a positive impact. Studies have shown that positive relationships within the school building can improve student outcomes, and that student engagement increases as the number of positive interactions increase (Martin & Collie, 2019). Not only has the one to one relationship helped motivate students by letting them know they have a team behind them, but teachers have also noted that building deep, high quality relationships have helped improve disciplinary issues. One teacher highlighted the caring approach he takes by saying, “they know that we are here for them, and not just someone to hound on them and fuss at them, I’m not here for that, I’m here to encourage them to do their best.” Another teacher noted, “I have a student with a very lengthy discipline record. Since I started working with him, teachers tell me that they have seen a change in him. I think that goes back to him being encouraged that somebody cares.” The teachers at MHS understand the value of simply letting the students know they care in a kind and graceful way.

The value in the relationships flows in both directions. As the previous teacher stated, it is encouraging to teachers when students respond to their efforts and make improvements. Not only do the students benefit from the relationships, but positive student-teacher interactions encourage teachers and help improve job satisfaction. Another teacher concurred:

They will come over to you like ‘coach, hey I have a B in here now,’ and they are not used to having a B in their class. So, it is very encouraging and they feel like they know they can do it now. So that is a very good product of it.

The effect can be contributed to a simple premise, when a student knows you will work for them, they are more willing to work for you, and the reward is two-fold. The teachers are encouraging the students, and the success they are seeing is in return encouraging the teachers.

Effective Leadership. Just as there is great value in the student-teacher relationship, there is just as much value in the administrator-teacher relationship. Positive interactions between administrators and teachers help encourage teachers much like the interactions between teachers and students. Research has shown that one of the primary barriers to RtI implementation is administrative support. As stated in the review of literature, Leithwood et al. (2007) outlines four core principles administrators can apply to support their teachers and promote effective change in schools: setting the direction, developing people, focusing learning, and improving instruction.

Setting the direction involves identifying needs, developing a common vision to address those needs, and promoting collaboration among staff members. Administrators can support teachers by providing opportunities for teachers to plan and collaborate as well as have leadership and ownership over initiatives. As discussed in the literature review, distributing leadership to teachers can help improve teacher effectiveness and improve teacher morale (Harris et al., 2007). As Dulaney (2012) found, providing teachers the time to lead and collaborate improved teacher perceptions of the RtI process. The administrators at MHS provide departments with the opportunity to request a half day of collaborative planning time to discuss needs, evaluate student data, and vertically align their curriculum. As one teacher stated:

Those times are usually when we talk about common assessments, things that we want to do for the kids, new types of incentives, or anything like that. So, this school system

gives us a good amount of time to get together and plan to be there for the kids and get them as interested or involved as possible.

In addition to planning time, the leadership at MHS provides teachers with opportunities to lead instruction. One teacher noted:

they are very open to suggestions and that is why I think the leadership, they let us kind of lead. They are like, ‘Oh, you think that is going to be great, let’s go ahead and you lead this.’ So, they don’t mind somebody taking over and helping out, and they don’t mind doing the same and so I think the opportunity is there and they do a great job of it.

The teachers show great appreciation for leadership that listens and allows teachers to take a leadership role both in and out of the classroom. Another teacher commented:

we have a lot of opportunities to lead, we lead professional development. Like if you are good at something, they might ask you to lead a session on it. We lead our AO period, and have autonomy in our classroom. So, it is just good that they trust us to do those things.

Providing collaborative and leadership opportunities helps teachers feel valued and trusted, and can contribute to an overall positive staff morale (Leithwood, 2012).

Developing staff involves providing professional development, individualized support, modeling values and practices, and mentoring (Leithwood et al., 2007). Administrators in this study demonstrated these qualities by modeling positive interactions for the staff and students, participating in the RTI process alongside the staff, and providing teachers opportunities for planning, collaboration, and leadership. Administrators have the opportunity to model positive and encouraging relationships within their school building by being visible and interacting with the staff and students. When an administrator makes themselves visible to the students, they take

notice of how the administrator and teacher interact. One participant mentioned how the administrators take time with both the teachers and the students, stating, “they are great at identifying needs and helping encourage both students and PST members.” Students see the administrative staff interact with staff and show that they value staff members. This type of relationship creates a positive climate and culture that trickles down from the administrator-teacher relationship to the teacher-student relationship. In addition to setting a positive example for teachers and students, the positivity carries over to other facets. One teacher stated, “their positivity has helped us even when we kind of get bogged down. I’ve sent one google classroom update, and I got twenty emails that day. So, it helps us stay positive and remember what we are doing.” Just like positive teacher-student interactions encourage and motivate students, positive administrator-teacher interactions can help encourage and motivate teachers.

Another way that school leaders can provide mentoring and model values is by participating in the process alongside the teachers. When administrators ask staff members to complete a task that they are not willing to complete, it creates resentment and disdain for the process. However, when teachers see that administrators are willing to participate in the capacity of a servant leader it creates a sense of appreciation and help the teacher feel like an equal. They teachers feel as though the leaders are genuine and are equally invested in the goals of the school. As previously stated by a PST member, “it is good to know that she is out there helping us collect what we need and facilitate. I think her caseload is even bigger than ours is. So, she is doing it too, which I think has helped you know.”

Focusing learning to develop the capacity for change involves redesigning participant roles and restructuring processes and procedures. As mentioned previously, leadership redefined their roles to work alongside teachers in implementation. Teacher roles were redefined to allow

special education teachers to not only serve the students on their caseload, but also help any student who is facing a minor struggle within a particular concept area that could be served with basic interventions. As Dulaney (2012) found, the implementation of RtI helped to bring staff together around a common goal.

With new roles, comes the need for new learning. Literature mentions that training and information are one of the major factors that lead to successful implementation of RtI (Dulaney, 2012). However, I was surprised to find that the staff at MHS has not received an overwhelming amount of formal professional development specifically directed at the implementation of RtI, but interview participants indicated that they felt they were thoroughly prepared to implement RtI with what they already knew. One participant commented, “most of the paperwork is common sense it’s not where a lot of training is required.” When it comes to implementing strategies, the teachers feel prepared as well. This can likely be contributed to teachers receiving professional development at previous schools and having prior years of experience with RtI implementation. Additionally, several participants (4) noted that while they have not completed a significant amount of professional development specifically regarding RtI implementation, MHS has spent considerable time with professional development to educate teachers on working with “at risk” students and students of poverty.

Participants mentioned that they found it especially helpful to have training in helping “at risk” students. One participant commented, “we always do a good bit of training as far as ways to encourage or help at risk students, I think that is always something that we could do better, and learn more about because we have a lot of at risk students.” Another participant added, “I think it has helped tremendously having those trainings where we kind of realize not everybody is living the life we are living.” So, while many teachers feel they can handle the structural

process of implementing RtI, they feel as though they could always learn more about relating to at risk students and building those extremely important relationships.

Providing Resources. In addition to providing emotional support, teachers must have the physical resources they need in order to accomplish their goal (Dulaney, 2012). Administrative staff can support implementation by providing physical space and materials dedicated to collaboration and professional learning. The instructional resource teacher noted:

We have a space dedicated especially for teachers to use for collaborative meetings and planning. We have the room equipped with everything they need: pencils, markers, chart paper, sticky notes, a projector, and even snacks. We want it to be an inviting place where they feel inspired to work and learn.

Dedicating a space solely for teacher use, and making it a welcoming place helps encourage teachers by showing that the administrative staff values the work that is taking place inside that room. This in turn leads to a positive, innovative culture where teachers feel comfortable discussing and trying new ideas. It serves as clean space where teachers can get away and saturate themselves with their own learning. Research has shown that when teachers feel supported, and have the tools necessary to succeed, they are more equipped to handle change.

Last, teachers felt encouraged when the administrative staff offered to help pick up some of the teacher's tasks when the teachers felt overwhelmed. As one teacher mentioned, "they are very involved and they are willing to help you out if you needed." Another added, "if we need to pull a kid, they will come cover our class so we can meet with that kid or attend a meeting" and "I was running behind and had to get my paperwork in and the assistant principal helped me send out what I needed to get to the teachers." This mentality is contagious and has created a climate where the teachers will go out of their way to help each other. One participant stated, "I think we

are all aware that if somebody needs help, let me do that, without really realizing that’s what we are doing.” Also, the assistant principal noted that being able to hire an instructional resource teacher has been a great benefit to the program. It has provided another resource for the teachers to rely on without feeling like they are being evaluated by an administrator. She is there as a resource and a person they can go to for questions, ideas, or if they need help.

Overall, participants mentioned building relationships, teacher support, and allocating physical resources most often when asked what factors have the greatest impact in supporting implementation. Table 7 summarizes these factors as well as the actions that the teachers and administrative staff implement to promote these factors.

Table 7 Factors that support the implementation of RtI

Enabling Factors	How the team at MHS exhibits these factors
Building Relationships	Maintain a positive approach to communication Learn about the individuals interests and needs Provide opportunities to listen to the individual’s concerns Celebrate successes together
Supporting Teachers	Model positive relationships and interactions Participate in the process Provide opportunities for planning, collaboration, and leadership Purposeful and necessary training and information only
Allocating Physical Resources	A space and materials for collaborative meetings Additional personnel and a helping hand

Overcoming the Inhibiting Factors

Documentation. Participants in the study mentioned that teachers feeling overwhelmed with documentation served as a major barrier to RtI implementation. However, several (3) participants mentioned that the team was succeeding in eliminating as many unnecessary steps as possible. One stated:

I think that it was a lot of stuff to try at once and just honestly, you have to sift out the good and bad. That is what we have done, and I think we are getting down to a really good simple, this is how we are going to do it every time. We are not using all this extra stuff that we don't need. At first it was very overwhelming and it was a lot of stuff and now it's just like oh, ok, we can do it.

It seems that teacher's feeling like they are doing unnecessary steps is a common theme when talking about the documentation process. Teacher's mentioned not minding doing the work, if they felt it was beneficial. One participant stated, "turning in work samples so the PST team can have that conversation with them. We see that you are not working or that you are struggling, have you gone to tutoring? That kind of thing is probably helpful for them." All of the participants felt that it was beneficial to turn in work samples. They saw the value in it and the story it told, and as a result they did not view it as a hindrance.

Several (4) participants in the study directly expressed the desire to trade time consuming documentation for relationships and conversation. One teacher expressed this by saying, "having conversations with the teachers allowed me more insight to know: Are you really struggling or are you not doing your work? Are you not coming to school? More so than looking at a sheet that said mastered or not." School leaders need to evaluate what purpose does the documentation serve, and is there a more innovative and efficient way to accomplish the goal? One suggestion is

for the staff to have collaborative conversations and discuss what is truly needed and what is the purpose of the documentation? Is the process informative and helpful for the student or is it being used as an evaluative measure to check that teachers are performing a task?

Communication and Trust. Mayrowetz, et al. (2007) stated that school climate and culture and relational trust among other factors, have the potential to promote fulfilment and job satisfaction among teachers. One of the perceptions regarding documentation was the feeling that some processes were there to evaluate whether teachers were completing a task, and that they really did nothing to serve the students. This leaves teachers feeling like they are not trusted, that they will not do what is right or needed, or that they will be lazy and not care. For example, as one teacher stated, “having to just take the time to document some of those strategies we do anyway. Like you see a kid struggling you are going to pull them to you, like that is just a natural thing to do, feeling like you have to document it, you know sometimes we see it different.” In this case, teachers feel as though the documentation is there to evaluate the teacher, and this creates a sense of distrust. As one participant stated, “I wish we didn’t have to document it, but if we didn’t then would we do it? It’s kind of a necessary evil. It’s definitely going to be necessary, so I am just not sure what we could do better.” One suggestion is that school leaders work with the faculty to help them examine the purpose of processes. If it is to verify a teacher’s actions then there may be other, more efficient approaches that can be agreed upon by both groups. For example, the best way to verify implementation may be to go observe it in action rather than have the teacher check off that it was done. If administration deems that a process is necessary, but teachers are resistant to implementation they may need to work to help the teachers understand the process better. It is important for leaders to consider implementation processes from the teacher’s perspective, clarify any misunderstandings or misinterpretations, and garner

feedback that can be used to make the process more efficient for them. If teachers do not understand the purpose of the documentation or a process, they may insert their own meaning that may not be accurate, and the misunderstanding may lead to unnecessary displeasure or stress. As one PST member pointed out, “I have teachers that are also annoyed because they don’t know what it is, and they don’t know the point”. As leaders, it is important to build trust with staff through ensuring transparency and understanding.

Attitude. Throughout the interview process, the overwhelming majority of teacher perceptions toward RtI were positive. No one mentioned burn out or exhaustion, and everyone mentioned the effect that the positivity of the administrative staff had on teachers. The teachers at MHS have illustrated through their responses that the factors listed in this chapter have contributed to their satisfaction with RtI implementation. Much of this can be contributed to the leadership approach taken by the administrative staff. The leadership at MHS helps their teacher’s feel valued, helps them feel success, builds capacity within the staff through training and support, can recognize when a teacher needs help, and extends a helping hand when the need arises.

Stressors on teachers are inevitable, and there is no way for a leader to ensure that every interaction a teacher has will be a positive one. However, we can work to minimize the negative factors affecting teachers and maximize the positive ones. While we cannot control what affects students and teachers in their personal lives outside of the school day, school leaders can influence what happens within the walls of the school, and it is important to make sure that teachers have enough positive factors to support them through the difficult moments. School leaders can help promote a positive climate is to make sure all teachers have opportunities to experience success in the classroom, and celebrate those successes with students. As the assistant

principal over RtI exclaims, “it is rewarding to see students learn to be successful and we want to make sure we can all celebrate those successes together.” This is why teachers and students can participate in the PST’s field trip that celebrates students that make progress each nine-weeks.

Additionally, it is important for leaders to provide staff members with opportunities to participate in team building and social encounters outside of the classroom. Teacher’s need relationships, and they need someone they can lean on when the day gets difficult. Leaders can provide opportunities for teachers through duty free lunch days, or work with local businesses or the school’s PTA to provide a faculty breakfast. It is important to note that all of these strategies reinforce the building of positive relationships, and relationships were the most prevalent enabling factor mentioned by participants.

Overall, the greatest inhibiting factor that participants mentioned was feeling overwhelmed with documentation or feeling that some of documentation was ineffective and therefore unnecessary. Participants also mentioned they felt that communication and trusting that teachers would implement RtI to fidelity could be improved. However, even with these obstacles, participants noted that the perception surrounding RtI remained positive. Table 8 summarizes these factors, as well as ways that participants and the literature suggest that staff can overcome these barriers.

Table 8 Overcoming factors that inhibit implementation

Inhibiting Factors	What the Teachers at MHS Expressed:
Documentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers have the opportunity to weigh in • Teachers only document what is necessary, they are trusted that they are investing in the process

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small tasks are not continually added to the teacher’s workload. Each small task adds up.
Communication and Trust	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers have the opportunity to give feedback • Teacher feedback is used to improve the process • Teachers understand the “why” behind implementation
Attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers have opportunities to realize success. • Successes are celebrated with teachers and students. • Time is allocated for teambuilding and social encounters among staff

Future Recommendations

Practice

Every participant in this study mentioned the importance of administrative support, and how the school leaders at MHS were always willing to help teachers. It also carries meaning that the teachers felt comfortable coming to the administrative staff if they felt behind or overwhelmed and could ask for help if they needed it. School leaders can help strengthen their climate and culture to support program implementation by performing the same duties they ask their teachers to perform. When administrative staff work alongside the teachers, it can help foster positive relationships between administrative staff and teachers (Leithwood, 2012), and it also builds trust by showing them that the administrative staff would not ask them to do anything they are not willing to do themselves.

Participants commented that they felt much of the documentation did not serve the purpose of promoting student growth, but served as a check for teachers to prove that they were

implementing the process. This made teachers feel like they were not being trusted to do what is right for the student. School leaders can foster a positive climate built on trust by evaluating the intention of processes and developing more efficient alternatives to such processes. One way to eliminate such a process is for administrators to visually inspect that the process is being implemented. Not only does it eliminate the need for a teacher to prove through documentation that they are implementing a process, but participants noted that when the administrative staff was visually present they felt supported. When school leaders were present in the classroom they had the opportunity to foster relationships with the staff and students, and demonstrate to the teacher that they believe in what they are doing and trust in them.

Last, participants noted that they felt supported when administrative staff went out of their way to ensure that teachers had the physical resources they needed to effectively implement RtI. The administrative staff at MHS ensured that teachers had a dedicated space for collaborative meetings, hired an additional staff member to serve as a resource for teachers, and provided all the materials needed for implementation. School leaders can improve implementation by listening to teacher needs and providing the physical resources for teachers to efficiently and effectively carry out implementation (Dulaney, 2012).

Research

MHS saw that their current model was not meeting the needs of their students and so they decided to evolve their RtI implementation to make student motivation and emotional support their primary focus while still utilizing research based strategies for intervention. Another recommendation would be to conduct further research to measure the effectiveness of the problem-solving approach coupled with a mentoring or social emotional learning (SEL) component to design a more comprehensive RtI plan to improve student outcomes.

Participant at MHS gave personal accounts of their students being successful, but MHS did not formally document and track the progress of their PST students beyond 10th grade. MHS decided on a quality versus quantity approach. The administrative team and staff members felt that their students were best served by focusing their limited resources intensively on teaching the freshman and sophomores the skills they needed to be successful in the later grades, rather than spreading their limited resources across all four grade levels. One recommendation for future research would be to examine the results of other high school RtI programs that focus the majority of their limited resources on intensively addressing students in the incoming ninth and tenth grades versus programs that spread their resources over all four high school grade levels.

Participants at MHS felt as though the PST process did provide greater accuracy in the determination of students who should be referred for special education testing, however there was no formal documentation to track the effects that the unique structure of the PST process at MHS had on the number of students referred for special education. Specifically, there is little research regarding the outcomes of ELL students in RtI. Case managers expressed that forming the personal relationship with the students on their caseload, helped them better understand the reason for their lack of achievement, and informed their decisions regarding special education referrals. A future recommendation would be to evaluate if the addition of a mentoring approach to the PST model has an effect on the improving the accuracy of identifying students who should be referred for special education testing, and discerning among students who may have a learning disability versus a lack of language proficiency.

Conclusion

This study has outlined how a single secondary school interpreted the RtI framework in an unconventional manner, and implemented components that best fit the specific needs of the

secondary students. Additionally, it examined teacher perceptions of what made the model successful, and what made the teachers feel supported by school leaders. The staff at MHS recognized the necessity for a model that met the specific needs of their students, and the school leaders understood the value in working alongside their teachers. This study changed my own perspective of the RtI process from a narrow focus on math and reading intervention, to a broader examination of the social-emotional factors that affect student outcomes. This case exemplifies that there is not a one size fits all approach to RtI. It is my hope that other school leaders may find value in the information presented in this study and can apply some of its findings to their own unique situation.

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Appendix 1 Auburn University Institutional Review Board Approval

**AUBURN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD for RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS
RESEARCH PROTOCOL REVIEW FORM
FULL BOARD or EXPEDITED**

For Information or help contact THE OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE (ORC), 115 Ramsay Hall, Auburn University
Phone: 334-844-5966 e-mail: IRBAdmin@auburn.edu Web Address: <http://www.auburn.edu/research/vpr/ohs/index.htm>

Revised 2.1.2014 Submit completed form to IRBsubmit@auburn.edu or 115 Ramsay Hall, Auburn University 36849.

Form must be populated using Adobe Acrobat / Pro 9 or greater standalone program (do not fill out in browser). Hand written forms will not be accepted.

1. PROPOSED START DATE of STUDY: 5/1/2018

PROPOSED REVIEW CATEGORY (Check one): FULL BOARD EXPEDITED
 SUBMISSION STATUS (Check one): NEW REVISIONS (to address IRB Review Comments)

2. PROJECT TITLE: Response to Instruction: A Secondary School's Approach to Implementing RtI

3. Crystal Adams Doctoral Candidate Educational Leadership ccp0011@auburn.edu
 PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR TITLE DEPT AU E-MAIL
691 Lee Rd. 71 Camp Hill, AL 36850 334-799-0953 caauburntiger@gmail.com
 MAILING ADDRESS PHONE ALTERNATE E-MAIL

4. FUNDING SUPPORT: N/A Internal External Agency: _____ Pending Received

For federal funding, list agency and grant number (if available). _____

5a. List any contractors, sub-contractors, other entities associated with this project:
None

b. List any other IRBs associated with this project (including Reviewed, Deferred, Determination, etc.):
None

PROTOCOL PACKET CHECKLIST

All protocols must include the following items:

- Research Protocol Review Form (All signatures included and all sections completed)
 (Examples of appended documents are found on the OHSR website: <http://www.auburn.edu/research/vpr/ohs/sample.htm>)
- CITI Training Certificates for all Key Personnel.
- Consent Form or Information Letter and any Releases (audio, video or photo) that the participant will sign.
- Appendix A, "Reference List"
- Appendix B if e-mails, flyers, advertisements, generalized announcements or scripts, etc., are used to recruit participants.
- Appendix C if data collection sheets, surveys, tests, other recording instruments, interview scripts, etc. will be used for data collection. Be sure to attach them in the order in which they are listed in # 13c.
- Appendix D if you will be using a debriefing form or include emergency plans/procedures and medical referral lists
 (A referral list may be attached to the consent document).
- Appendix E if research is being conducted at sites other than Auburn University or in cooperation with other entities. A permission letter from the site / program director must be included indicating their cooperation or involvement in the project.
 NOTE: If the proposed research is a multi-site project, involving investigators or participants at other academic institutions, hospitals or private research organizations, a letter of IRB approval from each entity is required prior to initiating the project.
- Appendix F - Written evidence of acceptance by the host country if research is conducted outside the United States.

FOR ORC OFFICE USE ONLY

DATE RECEIVED IN ORC: _____ by _____ PROTOCOL # _____
 DATE OF IRB REVIEW: _____ by _____ APPROVAL CATEGORY: _____
 DATE OF IRB APPROVAL: _____ by _____ INTERVAL FOR CONTINUING REVIEW: _____
 COMMENTS: _____

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 04/28/2018 to 04/28/2020
 Protocol # 18-220 ELP 1204

Appendix 2 Site Authorization Letter



OPELIKA HIGH SCHOOL

1700 LAJAYETTE PARKWAY PHONE (334) 745-9713
OPELIKA, ALABAMA 36801-3199

Monday, September 9, 2019

Institutional Review Board
c/o Office of Research Compliance
115 Ramsay Hall
Auburn University, AL 36849

Dear IRB Members,

After reviewing the proposed study, "Response to Instruction: A Secondary School's Approach to RtI Implementation", presented by Mrs. Crystal Adams, a graduate student at Auburn University, I have granted permission for the study to be conducted at Opelika High School.


The purpose of the study is to explore how a single Alabama secondary school is implementing the Response to Instruction framework. The primary activity will be the observation of a PST meeting, observation of teacher intervention delivery, collection of RtI related artifacts, and faculty interviews.

I understand that observations and interviews may require multiple sessions and will occur during regular school hours, or after school hours if agreed upon by the participant. I expect that this project will end not later than December 31, 2019. Mrs. Crystal Adams will contact and recruit faculty participants and will collect data at Opelika High School.

I understand that Mrs. Crystal Adams will receive consent for all participants, and have confirmed that she has the cooperation of the classroom teachers. Mrs. Crystal Adams has agreed to provide to my office a copy of all Auburn University IRB-approved, stamped consent documents before she recruits participants on campus. Any data collected by Mrs. Crystal Adams will be kept confidential and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in her AU advisor's office. Mrs. Crystal Adams has also agreed to provide to us a copy of the aggregate results from her study.

If the IRB has any concerns about the permission being granted by this letter, please contact me at the phone number listed below.

Sincerely,


Dr. Farrell Seymore, Principal
Opelika High School

Appendix 3 Informed Consent for Research Study



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS,
LEADERSHIP AND TECHNOLOGY

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS AN IRB APPROVAL STAMP WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN APPLIED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

INFORMED CONSENT
for a Research Study entitled
"Response to Instruction: A Secondary School's Approach to Implementing RtI"

You are invited to participate in a research study to explore Response to Instruction (RtI) implementation at the secondary school level. RtI is a State mandated intervention program designed to aid struggling students. The study is being conducted by Crystal C. Adams, under the direction of Lisa Kensler, Emily R. and Gerald S. Leischuck Endowed Associate Professor and Program Coordinator for Educational Leadership in the Auburn University Department of Education. You are invited to participate because you are a secondary school teacher at _____ High School, involved with RtI implementation, and are age 19 or older.

What will be involved if you participate? If you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to participate in a 90 minute focus group, and a 45-60 minute interview. Your total time commitment will be approximately 2.5 hours, and will be scheduled at the participant's convenience. Focus group and interview sessions will be digitally audio recorded, and transcribed following the session. At the completion of transcription, audio recordings will be destroyed. Recordings and resulting transcriptions will only be used for the immediate study.

Are there any risks or discomforts? Breach of confidentiality is always a possible risk in a study involving focus groups or participant interviews. In an effort to minimize risks, focus group participants will be asked to sign a focus group confidentiality agreement. Additionally, participant identifiers will be stored in a location separate from interview data, and will be destroyed upon completion of the study.

Are there any benefits to yourself or others? If you participate in this study, you can expect to gain insight into RtI implementation at your school. We/I cannot promise you that you will receive any or all of the benefits described.

Will you receive compensation for participating? Compensation will not be provided for participation in this study.

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Protocol # 18-220 EP 1904

Participant Initials

4036 HALEY CENTER
AUBURN, AL 36849-5221

TELEPHONE
334-844-4400

FAX:
334-844-3072

www.auburn.edu



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS,
LEADERSHIP AND TECHNOLOGY

Are there any costs? The only cost associated with this study will be time dedicated to a focus group session, and an interview session.

If you change your mind about participating, you can withdraw at any time during the study. Your participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to withdraw, your data can be withdrawn as long as it is identifiable. Your decision about whether or not to participate or to stop participating will not jeopardize your future relations with Auburn University, the Department of Education or _____ High School.

Any data obtained in connection with this study will be kept confidential. We will protect your privacy and the data you provide by using anonymous labels (participant 1, 2, etc.) for data collection purposes. Information collected through your participation may be used to fulfill an educational requirement, published in a professional journal, and/or presented at a professional meeting, etc.

If you have questions about this study, please ask them now or contact Crystal Adams at ccp0011@auburn.edu (334)799-0953 or Dr. Lisa Kensler at lisakensler@auburn.edu (334)844-3020.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Auburn University Office of Research Compliance or the Institutional Review Board by phone (334)-844-5966 or e-mail at IRBadmin@auburn.edu or IRBChair@auburn.edu.

HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED, YOU MUST DECIDE IF YOU WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT. IF YOU DECIDE TO PARTICIPATE, YOUR SIGNATURE ON THIS FORM AND THE DATA YOU PROVIDE WILL SERVE AS YOUR AGREEMENT TO DO SO. A COPY OF THIS LETTER WILL BE KEPT ON FILE BY THE RESEARCHER, AND ONE COPY WILL BE PROVIDED TO THE PARTICIPANT.

4036 HALL CENTER
AUBURN, AL. 36849-5228

TELEPHONE:
334-844-4460

FAX:
334-844-3072

www.auburn.edu

Participant's signature Print Name Date

Investigator's signature Print Name Date

Co-Investigator's signature Print Name Date

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Appendix 4 Observation Protocol

The Auburn University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 04/28/2019 to 04/28/2020 Protocol # 18-220 EP 1904

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

ACTIVITY & LOCATION: _____

Date: _____ Start Time: _____ End Time: _____

Activity Description: _____

Observation Notes	Reflective Notes
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Description of physical setting and physical location of participants in relation to the individual leading the activity

Questions to self, interpretations, thoughts

--	--

Progression of RtI Activity

--	--

Verbal behaviors of school administration during session: duration of speaking, tone, conversation initiators, leaders of conversation Other's responses to behaviors

--	--

Physical leadership behaviors of school administration: movement, body language, proximity to other persons Other's responses to behaviors

--	--

Describe teacher leader participation Other's responses to behaviors

Other Notes/ Observations	

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Appendix 5 Interview Protocol

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04/29/2019 to 04/29/2020
Protocol # 15-200 I.P. 1904

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL		
IDENTIFIER:	DATE:	START TIME:
	END TIME:	

Introductory Protocol

To facilitate our note-taking, we would like to digitally record our conversations today. For your information, only I and the faculty advisor on the project will be privy to the recordings which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. Additionally, all information will be held confidential, your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and we do not intend to inflict any harm. Information collected through your participation may be used to fill an educational requirement, published in a professional journal, and/or presented at a professional meeting. Thank you for your agreeing to participate. This interview will last no longer than one hour.

Introduction

You have been selected to speak with us today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about Response to Instruction implementation on this campus. This case study focuses on the implementation of RtI in an Alabama secondary school, the program's processes and procedures, and the factors that complement implementation. This study does not aim to evaluate your techniques or experiences. Rather, the aim is to learn more about faculty practices that help inform other practitioners about RtI implementation.

Interviewee Background

How long have you been:

- An educator? _____
- In this current position? _____
- Involved in any capacity in RtI implementation? _____

What is your:

- Highest degree? _____
- What is your area of certification? _____

Interview Protocol

Notes:

General

Describe your role in RtI implementation here.

Probe: What are some of your tasks/roles in RtI?

How did you get involved in RtI implementation?

Probe:

Intervention

Tell me about your perception of the intervention process.

Probe: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the process? How is it evaluated?

Progress Monitoring

What does the process look like that is used to make decisions about student placement?

Probe: Who participates, how often does it take place, what resources are used

Special Education

Describe the relationship between RtI and Special Education at your school.

Probe:

Data

Describe how your school utilizes data to make decisions?

Probe:

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

IDENTIFIER:

DATE:
END TIME:

START TIME:

Cultural Responsiveness	Describe how RtI considers the cultural and socioeconomic factors of students. Probe:
Parents	How do parents perceive the RtI process? Probe:
Leadership	Describe the role of your RtI Coordinator. Probe: Do they perform other tasks in addition to being the RtI Coordinator? What characteristics help/hinder the process? Describe the input you have in the RtI process. Probe: What role do teacher leaders play in your school? Probe: Describe impact teacher leaders have in your school and RtI. Describe how you feel the teaching staff views the RtI process. Probe: Describe how the school administrators view the RtI process. Probe: Describe the support the teaching staff receives from the administration. Probe: Describe the support the administration receives from Central Office staff Probe:

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