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Teachers' Perceptions on Implementation of RTI

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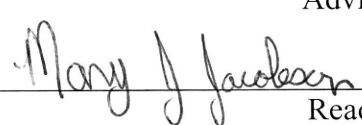
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ABSTRACT

Teachers' Perceptions on Implementation of RTI

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Abstract: Responsiveness to Intervention (RTI) is progressing its way through school districts and could be used as a new model for identifying learning disabilities, thus replacing the discrepancy model of learning disability identification. Although RTI was established within IDEA 2005 and the No Child Left Behind Act, school districts are slowly transitioning to this innovative, three-tiered process. The purpose of this study was to explore the implementation of RTI and introduce its use to elementary school teachers. Further, another goal of the study was to ascertain its connection to reading instruction and intervention already present in one elementary school and their views of RTI.

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Introduction

Many educators have been unsatisfied with the current practices in the special education

eligibility process for students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), primarily in the area of

reading. For years, the discrepancy model - or described by Bell (2005) as the "wait-to-fail"

model - has been used throughout the nation. McEneaney, Lose and Schwartz note the

discrepancy approach to defining reading difficulties, however, continues to rely on factors

within individuals. A more *general* statistical model remains and the reader continues to serve as

the locus of the disability, with explanations and instructional approaches based on individual

attributes (McEneaney, Lose, Schwartz, 2006). A discrepancy model of disability has long

served as the primary operational definition for researchers and practitioners in special education

(McEneaney, Lose, Schwartz, 2006).

The discrepancy model has deep historical roots dating back to Franzen's (1920)

Accomplishment Quotient (AQ), a ratio of achievement relative to IQ (McEneaney, Lose,

Schwartz, 2006). According to Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) the frustration that educators experience

is with the current discrepancy model particularly with the IQ-achievement discrepancy. The

discrepancy varies nationwide in terms of (a) how it is computed (e.g. standard IQ score minus

standard achievement score versus regression of IQ on achievement), (b) its size (e.g., 1.0

standard deviation (SD) versus 2.0 SD, and (c) which IQ and achievement tests are used (2006).

Fuchs and Fuchs state these varying definitional features and criteria have led to large

inconsistencies in Learning Disabilities (LD) prevalence between states and even in districts

within states (2006).

Therefore, Congress included Responsiveness to Intervention (RTI) in the reauthorization

of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA: P.L. 108-446).

As described by the International Reading Association (IRA), RTI is a problem-solving model to meet the needs of struggling readers who typically would be referred for a special education evaluation. RTI includes an intensive, early reading intervention that precedes placement in special education services. Additionally, the goal of RTI is to reduce the number of children entering special education because of unaddressed reading problems (Bell, 2005). IRA (2005, pg. 22) clarified RTI by explaining that "The RTI process does not necessarily lead to a learning disability designation. Rather, RTI is an effort to avoid an unnecessary learning disability designation by giving the student precise scientifically based reading help much earlier in the game."

The purpose of this paper is to examine the likelihood that experienced teachers will implement RTI in their classrooms and schools. Another goal of this paper is to understand if teachers had the skills on which to build a new RTI program if it was adopted at their schools. According to Fullan (2001), the likelihood that teachers will implement a new reform is related to how much the new reform is related to current teacher practice. Much of the current RTI research is burgeoning out of special education professional journals that have special education teachers as their target audience. Ironically, it is general education teachers who will play the main role in implementing RTI. General education teachers will be expected to do more assessments of students and teach struggling students during brief intense reading lessons (Mastropieri & Scruggs 2005). Additionally, the role of the reading specialist will also evolve with the potential implementation of RTI in schools. The reading specialist will be expected to work alongside the general education teachers in their classrooms, as well as collaborate with the special education teachers to create effective lesson plans for struggling readers.

Many states, including Minnesota, are in the exploratory stage of RTI and maintain the use of the discrepancy model for SLD eligibility. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA; P.L. 108-446) permits educators to use RTI as a substitute for, or supplement to, IQ-achievement discrepancy to identify students with SLD (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). Because of this flexibility and new way of thinking about learning disabilities, school districts are beginning to experiment with RTI. Therefore, it is essential for general educators to familiarize themselves with RTI as it becomes a potential new process in their professional environment.

In addition, IDEA 2004 gives more financial flexibility to local education agencies (LEAs). LEAs can use 15 percent of IDEA funds to provide services before students are identified with a disability. The law allows more federal and local funds to be commingled to support "maintenance of effort" requirements (Bell, 2005). Funds can be used for professional development of non-special education staff. Provisions apply through twelfth grade, although RTI emphasizes interventions for children in kindergarten through fifth grade (Bell, 2005). Such flexibility makes RTI attractive from an administrational point of view, but it is still unknown how teachers will receive this reform.

Contemporary US Policy

On December 3, 2004, President George W. Bush signed into law the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004). The revised law is different from the previous Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA, 1997) in at least one important aspect (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Whereas practitioners were previously encouraged to use IQ-achievement discrepancy to identify children with learning disabilities (LD), they now may use "Response to Intervention" or RTI, a new alternative method (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2006).

The authors state a discrepancy model represents a significant shift from an explicitly casual to a more statistically grounded model; its premise is that the individual reader's disability is a localized problem, a position challenged by a transactional view of reading and reading difficulties (McEneaney, Lose, and Schwartz, 2006). This transactional view will be discussed later in the Review of Literature section.

Reading as a Concern for Policy Makers and School Leaders

In 2001, a general education bill was also signed by the Bush administration, entitled the "No Child Left Behind Act of 2001." Under this Act, schools are required to measure students' success by issuing state performance tests (often referred to as "high stakes" tests) to prove all students are making gains toward proficiency. Schools who demonstrate students are making gains toward proficiency are considered to be making Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP). Schools that do not make AYP are put on a "schools in need of improvement" list revealing what subject areas and populations are below the mark for that particular school. If schools do not make adequate progress they are put on the list again and there are repercussions if a school fails for three or more consecutive years. Because there is pressure on schools to perform and make adequate progress, reading scores become very important. If a school has a high number of students who are behind at their grade level for reading, more than likely they will not achieve the gains necessary to make adequate yearly progress.

RTI as an Approach to Assist Students Who Struggle in Reading

RTI's purposes are (a) to encourage and guide practitioners to intervene earlier on behalf of a greater number of children at risk for school failure, and (b) to represent a more valid method of LD identification because early intervention will decrease the number of "false positives" or students given a disability label who are low achievers because of poor instruction

rather than an inherent disability (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2005). Such purposes have ramifications for both special education (as noted in IDEA 04) and general education (as noted in NCLB 2001).

The general approach to RTI is that students receive the help they need quickly. For example, small group instruction for the "at-risk" student is required. Because the instruction is in groups smaller than three, students benefit from receiving more attention and the instruction is at least three times a week for at least 30 minutes (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005).

Another benefit of RTI is that it is a collaborative effort rather than relying only on specialist teachers. RTI requires the classroom teacher, the special educator and the reading specialist to work together to deliver high-quality, research-based instruction. This is especially advantageous for the classroom teacher because it makes them more involved in the educational decision for their student, whereas in the current model, once the student is referred to the special educator, this professional makes the decision of what is best for the student (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005).

How RTI is used in Schools (Three "Tiers" Approach)

To implement a Response to Intervention plan requires several steps in the recommended Three Tier Model. The first step to an RTI is to screen the student. Students who are identified as "at-risk" for school failure (those scoring below the 25th percentile in previous year's state assessments) will be screened first (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2005). Students can also be identified for screening using other current achievement test scores in which the student also falls below the 25th percentile. After screening, all children are instructed in a large-group setting. In this setting (Tier I), the classroom teacher will implement classroom instruction that reflects sound instructional design principles and shows evidence based curricula and instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). During Tier I, at-risk students will be monitored for eight weeks. After eight

weeks, students will be administered the same screening tool or brief standardized achievement test to measure academic gains. Adequate Tier I response is operationalized by a score above the 16th percentile (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2005).

If students are nonresponders, they will receive another eight-week supplementary, diagnostic instructional trial; Tier II (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2005). For this to proceed, the parents must meet face-to-face with the teachers and administrators to continue on to Tier II. General Education and Special Education colleagues will work together to collaborate to design a supplementary, diagnostic instructional trial tailored to the needs of the Tier II student (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). The general educator or classroom teacher will implement the instruction but another person (most likely a specialist) will conduct the lesson. Tier II students (those who did not respond to Tier I instruction) will receive small group instruction with no more than three students. They meet three times a week for 30 minutes using scientifically validated, standard curriculum (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005).

After the Tier II eight week session, Tier II students (who are Tier I nonresponders) will be issued another screening tool or standardized achievement test. An adequate response would be a score above the 16th percentile (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). Students who do not respond to this approach will be referred for further diagnostic testing to determine if special education services are appropriate (if the parents agree to this procedure). Determination of need for special education services is a main activity of Tier III. If the student qualifies for special education services, the special education teacher will begin the process of starting an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for the specific student (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005).

Researcher Douglas Marston refers to a survey conducted by David Tilly III using one hundred twenty-one schools in which all students in grades kindergarten through third grade

were assessed in Tier I. Students who did not respond were moved to Tier II. In this study at the schools involved, forty-five students were then observed for the next stages of this study. In the Three Tier system, 92% of all students responded to intervention either in Tier I, Tier II, or Tier III. This is an encouraging sign because this means only 8% of the students were then referred to a special educator for an IEP (Marston, 2005). A rigorous system can help combat one of the biggest problems in special education; overidentification of students with specific learning disabilities. The SLD population has increased over 150% since 1977 (Kavale, Holdnack, Mostert, 2005).

Implementing RTI

Despite the policy-level support that RTI has experienced, implementation of this reform will still happen (or not happen) as a result of teacher behavior. In this study, I seek to understand the likelihood of teachers effectively implementing RTI. Specifically, I seek to understand how experienced teachers will react to this new reform and what their attitudes and skill-sets about implementation are.

Review of Literature

RTI is a relatively new topic in the education field, so there has not been many studies conducted by researchers. However, there are a few researchers who have already taken on RTI as a major interest in their studies, largely because it is still not being implemented in many schools around the country. What research is available, however, is reviewed in an effort to clarify issues surrounding RTI.

The Preponderance of Students in LD Programs with Reading Disabilities

Fuchs and Fuchs (2004) stated that roughly 80% of students receiving services for learning disabilities have been described as having difficulty in the area of reading. In addition, the authors stated that policymakers and academics have been frustrated by the LD construct generally and by IQ-achievement discrepancy particularly. One prominent reason is economics. In a sense, the LD label has become too common for its own good – numbers of students identified with reading-related learning disabilities are growing exponentially. Shortly after LD was legitimized as a special-education category in 1975, the proportion of children with LD in the general U.S. population skyrocketed from less than 2% in 1976-1977 to more than 6% in 1999-2000. This increase has proved expensive for school districts because, on average, it costs two to three times more to teach children with disabilities than students without disabilities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

The Problem with Discrepancy Approaches to LD (Including Over-Identification)

The International Reading Association, in a 2005 document entitled *IDEA Legislation Adds Response to Intervention Component* stated that it had serious concerns over whether students were failing in schools because of student factors or because of ineffective teachers. In a position statement documented in 2003, the IRA stated: "Data indicate, for example, that 80% of

children referred for an SLD (specific learning disability) are referred because of reading problems. This is a substantial number of children because the specific learning disabilities account for 50% of the children placed in special education (Reading Today, pg. 22, 2003)."

Part of the problem may be students have not had the opportunity to learn. Information provided by the United States Department of Education (USDE) suggests that to ensure all students receive an opportunity to learn, RTI, in principle, was proposed as a valuable approach for schools because of its potential utility in the provision of appropriate learning experiences for all students and in the early identification of students as being at risk for academic failure. Students need and benefit from a close match of their current skills and abilities with the instructional and curricular choices provided within the classroom. When a mismatch occurs, students' learning and outcomes are lowered. For some students, typical classroom instruction is appropriate and meets their needs, but for others, success is not easy. The hypothesis is that the earlier these struggling students can be identified and provided appropriate instruction, the higher the likelihood they can be successful and maintain their class placement. Thus, their underachievement is reduced or eliminated. Through RTI all students are given the same opportunity to learn and teachers will be able to continue teaching to meet the struggling students' needs. RTI is one way in which schools could be utilized to help reduce the number of students, regardless of race, into a SLD program.

Fuchs and Fuchs noted that IQ-achievement discrepancy, which is the most widely used method of LD identification, has often been viewed as the culprit with respect to rising special education enrollments and costs. The discrepancy approach has been frequently criticized as atheoretical and, according to some; this absence of theory has permitted states and districts to specify discrepancy differently (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Fuchs and Fuchs state one example of

how discrepancy varies nationwide is in terms of how it is computed (i.e. standard IQ score minus standard achievement score in some states versus the regression of IQ on achievement in others).

Further, Fuchs and Fuchs argued that the inconsistencies in the definition of IQ-achievement discrepancy and varying prevalence rates – as well as the outright noncompliance by some school-level personnel with state and district guidelines – have contributed to a widespread view that LD designation is whatever teachers and parents want it to be. A more damaging assertion, perhaps, is that the IQ-achievement discrepancy approach fails to distinguish a qualitatively different and more deserving subgroup of students from a much larger group of "low achievers" (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

Fuchs and Fuchs also state that some studies suggest that young, poor readers with and without an IQ-achievement discrepancy perform similarly on many reading-related cognitive tasks, as well as demonstrate phonological processing deficits that are correctable with appropriate instruction. Thus, say critics, thanks to the IQ-achievement discrepancy approach, the LD label is not just arbitrarily assigned, it is unfairly withheld from children who are needy and deserving as those given the label (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Fuchs and Fuchs also note that many who advocate on behalf of RTI may view it as a means of reallocating resources – away from discrepant, middle-class children of "dubious disability" (p. 96) to nondiscrepant, low socioeconomic-status, low-achieving students who, prior to IDEA reauthorization, often fell between the cracks of service-delivery systems.

Concerns that IQ-achievement discrepancy is atheoretical and arbitrary, and that some of its basic assumptions have not been supported by research, have crystallized for many into two major criticisms (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). First, the discrepancy model represents a wait-to-fail

model antithetical to early intervention; that is, children must fall dramatically behind their peers in academic achievement to qualify as LD. Second, critics say that the low achievement of some children classified as LD is presumed to reflect disability when, more times than not, it reflects poor teaching (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Because RTI encourages appropriate use of evidence-based instruction across tiers, it should in principle decrease the numbers of children incorrectly identified as learning disabled.

RTI as a Policy Mandate and Solution to the Prevention of Over-Identifying Students

The Response to Intervention model proposes identification of students with reading difficulties on the basis of a series of progressively more intensive instructional interventions over extended periods of time (McEneaney, Lose, Schwartz, 2006). McEneaney, Lose and Schwartz state there are three advantages of an RTI approach. First, RTI does not force children to wait to fail to be eligible for support. Second, RTI avoids problems associated with process-deficit and discrepancy models, and third, RTI is instructionally grounded, enhancing the ecological validity of the diagnostic process and more clearly grounded it in subsequent instruction.

Much of the research on reading difficulties has sought to distinguish low-achieving readers from those with a reading disability (McEneaney, Lose, Schwartz, 2006). As McEneaney, Lose and Schwartz suggest the following, a transactional perspective on reading and reading difficulties is one in which the understanding of the natural variability of readers is more important and productive than diagnostic categories. Diagnostic categories have more to do with funding policy and legislation than they do with learning to read. In contrast with deficit-oriented views, a transactional perspective adopts a broader, pragmatic and situated view of reading within the complex social contexts and events in which it occurs. In this view,

reading ability is not a property of the reader and may vary widely depending on contextual

circumstances. Moreover, educators have found this emphasis on natural variability across

environmental contexts to be an important pedagogical idea, both because it better reflects the

complex circumstances of the classroom and it focuses more directly on the contributions

teachers can make to support successful reading. Unlike process deficit and discrepancy models,

a transactional perspective more directly addresses the ultimate goal of diagnosis: resolving

reading difficulties. This is one aspect of the RTI approach that the authors believe has

considerable promise.

<u>Teacher Implementation of New Policy</u>

According to Fuchs and Fuchs (2007), to implement RTI for prevention and

identification, schools must make decisions about ten components that constitute the process: (1)

how many tiers of intervention to use, (2) how to target students for preventative intervention,

(3) the nature of that preventative intervention, (4) how to classify response, (5) the nature of

multidisciplinary evaluations prior to special education, and the function and design of special

education, (6) balancing rigidity and flexibility, (7) movement within tiers, (8) fidelity, (9)

resources and (10) roles for professionals. These decisions are outlined below.

Decision #1: Number of Tiers

The first decision that schools face is determining the number of prevention tiers that

constitute their RTI system (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). General education is always considered the

first tier, and students who are targeted for preventative intervention must first show evidence of

failing to respond to this universal core program (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). Fuchs and Fuchs state

the second tier should be more intensive than general education (first tier) but less intensive than

special education. Students must also show poor response to this second tier of prevention

before special education is initiated at a third tier. Fuchs and Fuchs also recommend that schools employ three tiers, with only one tier separating general and special education. The reason for this recommendation is because of the difficulty of designing more than one tier of preventative intervention that can be reliably distinguished in format, nature, style and intensity both from general and from special education (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007).

Decision #2: Identifying Students for Prevention

A second programmatic challenge for schools is how students are targeted to receive prevention (2007). Schools must decide if they want to employ one-time universal screening, whereby all children in a school are assessed on a brief measure at the beginning of the school year (one example teachers could use to assess their students would be the Woodcock Reading Mastery Tests – Word Identification) (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). In other RTI models, Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) state some schools choose to do multiple assessments over a course of five to eight weeks. The authors further recommend that schools use universal screening in combination with at least five weeks of weekly progress monitoring in response to general education to identify students who require preventative intervention (2007). The reason they made this recommendation is because schools who identify students on one-time universal screening means that schools are pressed to deliver costly prevention to large numbers of student who do not need those services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007).

Decision #3: What Preventative Intervention Looks Like

Schools must also decide what the structure of their interventions will be. Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) state it relies on preventative interventions which are individually tailored to meet the student's learning needs. Fuchs and Fuchs suggest the following: these preventative interventions often conceptualize academic deficiencies as motivation problems. These

interventions, therefore, attempt to increase student performance on skills that are already acquired, rather than designing instruction to develop new skills. The other type of intervention, according to Fuchs and Fuchs is to rely on "standard protocols" that have been shown via randomized controlled studies to improve most students' academic achievement. These standard protocols are more intensive than Tier I general education because they rely on small-group tutoring by a professional teacher or a trained and supervised paraprofessional, three to four times per week for anywhere from 10 to 20 weeks, because the protocols attempt to ensure mastery for the majority of students; because they minimize transitions and maintain good pace, while attempting to ensure high levels of on-task behavior; and because they incorporate self-regulation strategies to increase goal-oriented behavior. Fuchs and Fuchs state (2007) even though these tutoring protocols are scripted, they can be roughly standardized across tutors and provide the opportunity to estimate the accuracy with which these tutoring protocols are implemented. According to Fuchs and Fuchs (2007), the reliance on research-validated preventative interventions that have been shown to be highly effective for majority of students speaks to a fundamental assumption within RTI: if the child responds inadequately to instruction that benefits most students, then the assessment eliminates instructional quality as a viable explanation for poor academic growth and, instead, provides evidence of a disability. The National Joint Commission on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) (2005) echoed Fuchs and Fuchs, noting that there need not be a specific structure to RTI programs, but structures should be designed for maximal student learning in the context of the school.

Decision #4: Classifying Response

Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) state there are four options to classify response. The first type is suggested at the end of intervention, any students whose performance is above the 24th percentile

be deemed responsive. If the student has reached the 24th percentile, the idea is that the intervention has "normalized" the student's performance. The second type employs a criterion-referenced benchmark for determining whether the intervention has made sufficient impact to ensure long-term success, (e.g. the student has a sufficient sight-word vocabulary to build upon in future reading endeavors.) A third option relies on slope of improvement during preventative intervention, rather than the student's final status at the end of the intervention. It has been suggested rank ordering the slopes of improvement for students who receive preventative intervention. Fuchs & Fuchs state the cut-point for distinguishing response from nonresponse is the median of those rank-ordered slopes (2007). The fourth option combines the slope of improvement with final status for classifying response in the following way. To be deemed unresponsive, a student must demonstrate a "dual discrepancy," whereby slope of improvement and final level are both at least one standard deviation below that of peers. Fuchs and Fuchs recommend that a dual discrepancy be used to designate unresponsiveness. Final status alone is problematic because it permits some students to be classified as unresponsive despite strong improvement. Fuchs and Fuchs state slope of improvement alone is problematic because it permits some students to be classified as unresponsive even though they complete intervention meeting the normalized or benchmark performance criterion (2007). Fuchs and Fuchs also state by contrast, a dual discrepancy, which simultaneously considers slope of improvement and final status, permits the unresponsive designation only when a student (a) fails to make adequate growth and (b) completes intervention below the normalized or benchmark criterion (2007).

Multidisciplinary Evaluation

Another issue that schools face in building their RTI model is how to design the multidisciplinary evaluation that federal law requires for special education placement (Fuchs &

Fuchs, 2007). In some RTI systems, multidisciplinary evaluations are comprehensive, with a standard battery of assessments administered to all students. In other RTI systems, multidisciplinary evaluations are specific to the questions that arise as a function of the student's participation in Tiers I and II (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). Another dimension along which multidisciplinary evaluations differ is whether the assessment is designed to distinguish among LD, mild mental retardation, speech/language impairment, and emotional behavior disorders as the disability underlying the lack of responsiveness (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). The authors state the following types of assessments are typically included: (a) adaptive behavior and intelligence to distinguish between LD and mild mental retardation, (b) expressive and pragmatic language to help inform distinctions between LD and language impairment, and (c) teacher rating scales, classroom observations, and parent interviews. These distinctions are warranted, of course, only if they provide utility for designing instruction and grouping students productively for instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). Fuchs and Fuchs state few, if any, strong studies have been conducted to assess the utility of these designations.

Decision #5: Special Education

Fuchs and Fuchs state most of the discussion about RTI focuses on the need to reform general education, because it is conceptualized as a research-based, multi-tiered system of preventative intervention to prevent LD for students who are otherwise instructional casualties and to identify LD for students for whom poor instruction is eliminated as an explanation for failure (Fuchs and Fuchs, 2007). Fuchs and Fuchs believe that special education needs to be reformed as well. Fuchs and Fuchs state a reformed special education should rely on lower student-teacher ratio, more instructional time, and use of ongoing progress monitoring, such as curriculum-based measurement, for deductively building programs that are shown empirically to address individual

student needs, which have proved unresponsive to a research-validated standard treatment protocol (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). NJCLD (2005) also noted that special education components of RTI should maintain a critical balance between attempting to minimize referrals for special education assessment and maximize Tier III instructional time for students already in the special education system. Fuchs and Fuchs state without such reform, special education's large student caseloads and unfortunate emphasis on paperwork and procedural compliance preclude effectiveness, and the responsibility for producing strong outcomes, in effect, resides entirely on the general education system (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). If attention on reforming general education were similarly allocated to reforming special education, then special education would represent a valued tier within RTI's multi-tiered intervention system, not a dreaded outcome of a failed general education system (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007).

Decision #6: Balancing Rigidity and Flexibility

According to the NJCLD as RTI models become more widely implemented in schools, educators are raising questions about the degree of rigidity or flexibility built into the implementations (NJCLD, 2005). The more stable the framework for RTI models, the greater the consistency across schools, districts, and states may increase the opportunity and likelihood that successful models can be researched and replicated (NJCLD, 2005). The NJCLD states that the more flexible the RTI program translates into more responsiveness to learners needs and maximizes problem solving opportunities (2005). Educators must feel comfortable working in a more flexible approach due to the fact that meaningful research and replication can be more problematic (2005).

Decision #7: Movement Between Tiers

According to the NJCLD, at present there is little agreement or data about what specific criteria or cut scores optimize decisions about movement through the tiers (2005). As stated by the NJCLD, similarly, the mandate that scientific, researched-based instruction be used limits the choices for beginning reading instruction and raises difficult questions about instructional options in such areas as mathematics, reading comprehension, and written expressions, in which few scientific, research-based interventions exist at the elementary or secondary level (NJCLD, 2005).

Decision #8: How to Ensure Fidelity to Treatment

The NJCLD state the major challenges of implementing RTI is the decision about selecting and monitoring research-based interventions that are matched to students and implemented with fidelity and appropriate intensity, frequency and duration (NJCLD, 2005). Fidelity of implementation is the delivery of instruction in the way in which it was designed to be delivered (Gresham, MacMillan, Boebe-Frankenberger, & Bocian, 2000). The NJCLD states fidelity must also address the integrity with which screening and progress-monitoring procedures are completed and an explicit decision-making model is followed. In an RTI model, fidelity is important at both the school level (e.g., implementation of the process) and the teacher level (e.g., implementation of instruction and progress monitoring).

Decision #9: Professional Roles

The NJCLD state there are new roles for all educational professionals, the new instruction, assessment, documentation and collaborative activities required for RTI implementation (NJCLD, 2005) and this will create new challenges for example:

1) General education teachers will need to compile relevant assessment data through continuous progress monitoring and respond appropriately to the findings.

2) Special education, pupil personnel, related services, and other support professionals need to help design, interpret and assess data as well as suggest instructional approaches.

3) Specialists, including special education teachers and LD specialists providing more intensive interventions, will be expected to master a variety of scientific, research-based methods and materials, and provide them with fidelity to groups of various sizes in different environments.

4) Administrative and supervisory staff will have to determine needed roles and competencies, existing skill levels and professional development requirements in order to provide immediate and ongoing training activities in these critical areas.

5) Critical questions also will arise about how a particular RTI approach will affect the specific roles and competencies required of education professionals. Decisions about these roles and resulting needed competencies include the following: Who is to deliver and monitor the high quality instruction needed in the various settings of RTI? Who will schedule and determine the composition of each decision-making team? Who will manage and supervise placement, services and follow-up activities? Who will have formal responsibility for ensuring that all professionals involved in an RTI approach possess the specific needed competencies and attitudes? Who will ensure ongoing involvement of and approval by parents?

Decision #10: Ensuring Adequate Resources

The NJCLD also state to implement an RTI approach, many questions about ensuring adequate resources must first be resolved. Some of the challenges are as follows (2005):

Time - implementation of an RTI approach can be expected to create a need for decisions about adjustments in daily student, teacher, and administrative schedules and time for decision-making team meetings to be incorporated into school, personnel and parent schedules. Time for professional development will need to be allotted both prior to adopting a new approach and on an ongoing basis.

Space and Materials – an important part of successful implementation of an RTI approach is provision of needed space and materials. These will include space for conducting intensive small group or tutoring interventions, as well as the materials and technology for professional development, evidence-based and intensive instruction, progress monitoring, evaluation and record keeping.

Documentation – for school personnel there will be increased paperwork due to data collection and documentation demands for the progress monitoring, classification criteria, movement between levels, intervention documentation and other record keeping that are critical for following progress of individual students in an RTI approach.

Financial Support – even though there is little information available about the comparative costs of different RTI models, there are increased resource requirements and added professional development activities associated with initial implementation of an RTI model which would suggest there will be increased costs in the short term.

Critiques and Possible Pitfalls of RTI

Although RTI has supporters in the literature, there are also detractors to this new method of teaching reading. According to Margie Bell (2004), many special education teachers are concerned that an approach like RTI will add non-special education children to their already full roster. Others fear that some children will be misdiagnosed as not needing special education referral when they actually do. According to Bell (2004) some are also concerned that the new IDEA allows 15 percent of special education funds to be used for RTI services, including professional development for general education and reading teachers to help them better serve the at-risk population. Bell (2004) noted that for and RTI system to work, teachers need to trust each other and develop a communication system. RTI is complicated because at times the Title I teachers would be working with special education students and sometimes the special education teachers would be working with Title I students. Bell states it can become a territorial issue – teachers may become suspicious of each other if one of their students has a different report from the cooperating teacher. Another challenge is that IDEA's RTI initiative hopes to address the imbedding of early intervention in the school culture so that it is sustainable beyond particular cohorts of teachers (Bell, 2004). In Bell's 2004 study of RTI implementation, when collaboration was not clearly communicated and codified within the school culture, the school drifted back to a more traditional grade-level pull-out system and special education referrals increased.

A recent article in the journal of learning disabilities by Mastropieri and Scruggs (2005) is also critical of RTI. In this article, the authors ask the question "who is responsible for ensuring that the procedures are implemented fully and with fidelity – special educators or general educators (Mastropieri and Scruggs, pg. 526)?" The authors also raise the issue that

many people ask, "Who is financially responsible for RTI (Mastropieri and Scruggs, pg. 526)?" Currently, it is unclear if the financial burden for RTI will be borne by general educators or special education. The authors' state that special education funds have never been fully allocated by the federal government, and are too limited to be employed in general education prevention efforts of this magnitude (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005). Mastropieri and Scruggs also state that if special education resources are expended to identify and provide remedial services to all students below the 25th percentile in reading achievement (i.e. 25% of the entire student population), that sufficient funds need to remain available to support students with lower incidence disability conditions, such as osteogenesis imperfecta, deaf-blindness, or severe intellectual disability (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005).

Methodology

Overview of Research Site

This study was conducted at an elementary school in a suburban area near a large metropolitan city. The elementary school is a part of a multi-city school district that serves students from surrounding suburbs. Currently the school district is experiencing declining enrollment, budget cuts, school closings, and teacher layoffs.

The demographics of the school chosen are different from the rest of the school district. The school where the research took place has less than five percent of the students who receive free and reduced lunch, whereas district-wide the average per school is closer to 25%. Because this school has a low number of free and reduced lunch students, they receive very little funding from the state or the federal government. Most of the other schools in the district receive federal funding for Title I and other services.

In addition, this particular school chosen for this study has also earned Adequately Yearly Progress (AYP) every year since the state of Minnesota has started the Minnesota Comprehension Assessments (MCA). Last year this school received three stars in Reading and four stars in Math according to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE). This system was created by the MDE to measure gains made by schools. Schools which receive three and four stars are deemed passing. Schools which receive one or two stars are considered not making progress. Schools which do not make progress over a three year period may lose funding and also could receive other sanctions (i.e. removal of administrators and staff).

Because this school district has been experiencing a declining enrollment, they have also suffered steep budget cuts which have resulted in large teacher layoffs. However, during this school year the district voted for an incentive plan enacted by the Minnesota government called

Quality Compensation or commonly referred as Q-Comp. The district gave each school monies received by the state government. Each school had the freedom to spend the money as they saw fit. At this school, every grade level has two teachers. Each class is averaging between 35 – 40 students per class. To prevent students and teachers from working with a large number of students all day, this school decided to hire half-time teachers who would be hired to teach exclusively reading, writing and math. This plan was put into place to help alleviate the large classroom problem. With the presence of half-time teachers, the average class size for half of the day is about twenty-five students.

Unfortunately, a down side to the half-time teaching positions is that the half-time teachers must share a room with each other and that means students between two grades must share their desks. This has made for interesting and at times challenging situations where students and teachers have to be very respectful of each others' belongings.

At the time this research was conducted, there was no school reading specialist due to budget constraints, but the school did invest in a computer program called Success Makers to help students who struggle in reading and math. In this program, the students are pulled from their classroom to have a maximum of fifteen minutes of intense intervention. The students go to the computer lab to work on the program which helps students improve in reading. The lab is staffed by two paraprofessionals and they are responsible for printing assessments which are given to the teachers monthly so they can interpret the data to see where students need improvements. At the end of each tri-semester, a student's report is sent home to the student's parents or guardians. If the student has reached their grade level, the parents have the final decision if they want their child to continue with the program. Parents also have the final say if they want their child to continue with the program even if they are not making improvements.

Besides using a computer reading intervention program, the school uses the Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress Test (NW MAP test). This test is given three times a year; in early September, early January and early May. The respondents, who agreed to participate in this study (the third grade team), use this data to create ability-based groups, mixed-ability groups, and guided reading plans to see where the students' reading levels are so they can develop worthwhile lesson plans for all of their students during whole group activity.

Description of Participants

Three teachers participated in this study. All three teachers met the theoretical sampling requirement of this study (i.e., they needed to teach reading in a general education, mainstream classroom). The reason the participants had to meet these requirements is because the teachers who teach RTI at the first tier are general education teachers. Each of the participating teachers is described below.

Teacher #1

Teacher #1 is a 25-year veteran. She has taught her entire career in the same school district. She is a resident of the community and school district where she teaches. She stated she does not belong to any professional organizations. She attended college at a medium-sized state university in the upper Midwest.

Teacher #2

Teacher #2 is a 17-year veteran. She has taught her entire career in the same school district. She stated she does not belong to any professional organizations. She attended college at a small private school in the upper Midwest. In 2007 she was awarded Wal-Mart's Teacher of the Year

– 2007. She received a $1000 check for her classroom. She is using it to buy new reading materials, which include books and computer software.

Teacher #3

Teacher #3 is a first-year teacher. She has spent the past two years working as a substitute teacher. She does not belong to any professional organizations. She attended college in a small- to medium-sized state university located in the upper Midwest. Teacher #1 is her mentor for her first year of teaching and she stated she has had a great working relationship with both Teacher #1 and Teacher #2. She feels they have welcomed her warmly in her first full year of teaching.

Procedures

This study began at the recruitment level. Interested teachers in the school responded to a flier regarding an opportunity to participate in an action research study. If teachers were willing to participate they were to return the form to me. In the first stage of the research, respondents were given a questionnaire regarding questions related to reading, how they taught reading, their familiarity with RTI and if they were a part of any professional organizations. Out of thirty-five teachers in the school, three responded. It happened to be the entire third grade team.

As noted above, shortly after recruitment, teachers filled in a questionnaire related to their background knowledge on RTI (see Appendix A). The study also had two qualitative components, formal and informal interviews and direct observations during the reading block. The direct observations (classroom visits) lasted anywhere from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half. The observer spent a total of twenty-one hours over a three week period observing the teachers. The observation schedule was designed so that an entire week was spent with each of each third grade teachers in order to learn and understand how they teach reading.

In addition to observing classroom teaching, I also attended and observed meetings. The third grade team meets every week for team planning; in addition they meet once every two weeks for Professional Learning Communities (PLC). During a PLC, the teachers typically discuss latest trends or techniques being used by other teachers, either locally, statewide or nationally. In particular this year the third grade team worked on teaching strategies for reading non-fiction texts.

In an effort to triangulate observation data, a series of formal and informal interviews were conducted with teachers (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The reason to triangulate the data was to obtain open ended responses from all three subjects without getting predetermined responses. This helps make the data become more credible in this study. Formal interviews followed a specific protocol (see Appendix B), which helped me to gather standard data from all three teachers. Informal interviews were also used, however, in relation to observations. During observations, I would note questions I had related to classroom or meeting events, and later ask teachers about them on an informal basis.

Analysis

After spending three weeks in the participants' classrooms, nearly 21 hours of observation, I had filled up three legal pads worth of field notes. I read through all of my notes to look for general themes. The rationale of my process was comparing and contrasting the observations I did of the teachers and compared it to what the researchers stated in regards to what you should see in a classroom where teachers use RTI. After reading all of my field notes, I started to see three general themes. The three themes I found were: 1 - findings which were relevant to teacher's use of researched-based practices, 2 - teacher's use of assessment and 3 - intervention for struggling readers. During my observations, which lasted anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour and a half, I recorded everything I observed. I was able to gather about 30 to 40 pages of field notes on each teacher.

To code my field notes, the first step was to type my field notes into the computer. Once the field notes were completed, I reviewed my notes to try and decipher any themes I could find. As themes emerged, I started to look for any notes which related to teaching or teaching reading strategies; using my computer I transferred those notes from my word document by typing them into a new document on the computer. I repeated this process when I was looking for notes that addressed assessments and notes that addressed intervention with struggling readers. For example; if the teacher was using a reading strategy to teach the students, I used the code RS. When the teacher was working with students on assessment, I coded the notes using a capital A to represent assessments or tests. When I observed students getting help or intervention for reading, I coded the notes using an I.

After spending time condensing my notes, slowly I started to see three themes emerge. These themes which emerged was what the researchers stated you should see in a classroom with

teachers who practice using research-based practices, teacher's use of assessment and intervention for struggling readers. At the beginning of my field notes, I was not sure how I was going to be able to decode my notes or find a common theme. However, as the weeks passed, I could see themes starting to develop as I was taking notes on the teachers teaching methods.

Findings

As noted above, in this research, I sought to find out to what extent experienced teachers were willing to adapt or implement an RTI program. In this study I was looking for teachers who had taught more than ten years. The reason I included the first year teacher in this study was to observe how she viewed RTI and to learn if she was as willing to adopt and implement an RTI program as well. Furthermore, I sought to understand if teachers had the skills on which to build a new RTI program if it was adopted at their schools. For the purposes of reporting data in an organized fashion, I have organized my findings into three themes: 1) findings relevant to teachers using research-based practices, 2) findings relevant to teachers' use of assessment, and 3) findings relevant to interventions for struggling readers. As noted in the Literature Review of this paper, each of the three themes are highlights of RTI programs. Teachers' responses and skills related to these highlights are described below.

Part I – Research Based Practices

When observing teachers I noted that all three teachers were using research-based practices in their classrooms. This was evidenced by several activities in their classrooms. First, teachers followed school district issued curriculum for reading. All use Harcourt, Trophies Theme book, which provides citation of the research-based strategies embedded in the text (Harcourt, 2002). Teachers also set up their classes doing whole group and small group discussions, a practice shown to improve student engagement (Harcourt, 2002). Third, teachers engaged their students in guided reading, a practice that can be used to help student reading fluency (Fountas and Pinnell, 1996). In addition to strategies used in their own classrooms, teachers collaborated weekly to plan their weekly lessons in reading. To promote consistency, teachers used the same sayings or vocabulary when teaching reading (i.e. right-there answer, on

my own answer which refers to inference). They incorporated writing which relates to the reading for the week. Below are excerpts from field notes from observations with Teacher #1 when she was teaching whole group instruction.

Teacher #1

Strategies

While observing teacher #1 during her reading block, I noticed how she modeled and introduced the theme story for the week from the research based curriculum. The story took place during the Great Depression in a rural community affected by the dust bowl. The teacher used different texts to relate to the story for the week. At one point she found an article from the World Wide Web and shared the passage with the students. The passage was about a farmer from the Northeast (New Hampshire); the passage explained how the drought affected the farming. After reading that passage, she opened up a book on the state of Washington to compare how the people from that state were affected by the Great Depression. She read a fact that stated half of the population was without jobs. Both of these passages related to the current story because it is based on a girl's family who's about to lose their farm to foreclosure and the area is hurting because the people are experiencing job losses. Here the teacher was introducing students to making text-to-text connections and text-to-real world connections. This is important for students to learn and understand, in this instance, how the Great Depression affected most everyone over 70 years ago.

Another area I observed in whole group is how she incorporated poetry into her lesson. The day I observed it was the last day of spring. She used a poem by Jack Prelutsky called *Snowman's Lament*. She read the poem aloud and asked the students to follow along on the overhead and make observations about the poem. The students responded that the wording is

getting smaller on each page as is the snowman. Again, she is using text to make real-world connections or using text to make self connections.

During the week, she emphasized the importance of learning the vocabulary words for the week. She started the week by having students work in groups of three and instructed them to find the meaning of the word by writing down where they found the definition. The student's choices are reading the context, reading around the context, looking at a picture, asking a neighbor or looking in the glossary. Looking in the glossary is the last resort. She encouraged the students to only to use the glossary once they had written down the definitions using their own words. On the graphic organizer the students have a section to list the word, a section to write down the meaning and the third column where they list the code – RC, read context, RAC, read around the context, P – looked at the picture, N – asked neighbor, G – went to the glossary. She was helping students learn how to look up words using different strategies. She was giving her students tools to help them decode words or locate them if they did not understand the meaning.

The other activity I observed in her class was the game she played with her students. In the middle of the week, to review their words, she placed giant post-it notes on the white board and had the students break into teams. She wrote the vocabulary words on the giant post it notes and asked two players from each to come up to the board. Because all of the words were action words she stood in the back of the room and, in addition to describing the meaning of the words, she acted out the vocabulary words so students had to pay attention to what she was doing. In this instance she did an activity which helped the students learn the words by relating them to the actions. She tied all of this together because by Friday the students had to turn in five sentences using their vocabulary words. Then on Friday, they were given the vocabulary test and the third

grade team had an incentive program where students could make the million dollar club. If the student got all of their vocabulary words correct, the student could write their name anywhere in the star. Because they review their vocabulary words almost daily, she usually ends up with most of her students getting 100 percent. She expected students to reread their stories; she asked them how to make inferences from the story. She modeled and asked how to find answers from the weekly assessment – she taught them how to find "right there" answers, or "on my own" questions (inference). She worked with students on Fact and Opinion.

Grouping:

During her small group sessions, Teacher #1 had three different groups of three to come back to her kidney bean table. After whole group, she reviewed with the students the focus of the story this week. She reviewed vocabulary words with them to see if they understood what she was teaching during the whole group. She asked students what was the setting for this week's story. She also inquired if they could share similar experiences they had learned reading about the great depression. She wanted her students to mention the passage about the farmer from New Hampshire or the passage from the book on the state of Washington. This way she checked for immediate comprehension of the lesson they did earlier that morning. The students she pulled to the back of her table are students who struggle at reading and her ESL students. During this time she also had the students read for her and they discussed any words they might not have understood. One on occasion she pulled her three ESL students and asked them during the passage if they knew what a piglet was. They guessed it must be a pig. She explained it is a baby pig. She then asked if they knew what a sow from the passage was. They were not sure. The passage read, *in the spring the sows gave birth to piglets,* the boys looked at the picture for context clues but they still did not answer. She asked them as she pointed to the picture, if this

animal had baby piglets what would this animal be – they all said pig. She agreed with them but without ever giving the answer she asked what kind of pig is a sow – the boys finally realized the answer to a sow was a female pig. I noticed during this whole week Teacher #1 was very good at leading students to the answers without ever giving them the answer. She made all of her students work really hard by thinking out their answers.

Guided Reading:

Once a week the students break into small groups where they read a book at their ability. An example of an assignment to go along with their ability based book would be to do a graphic organizer where students collect and gather their ideas so they can write a paragraph of what they have read. The teacher expects all the students to have an opening sentence or main idea, supporting details and a closing statement or ending. The teacher uses her NW MAP tests scores to place her students in the correct level of reading so the students will have success reading versus frustration.

Writing Assignments:

At the beginning of the week they start out with a writing assignment that relates to their weekend and the rest of the week the writing assignment they work on relates to the theme book for the week. The Monday I observed teacher #1 they had just returned from spring break. During this writing she had the students share with the class what they did. The whole time she was using certain words, such as – "nice opening sentence," "did you hear his/her main idea," "nice supporting details." During this exercise all of the students were able to point out what the main idea was, what the supporting details were and if the students had a closing sentence or not from the other students. I was rather impressed how she was able to use a lot of the student's writings who went to the Wisconsin Dells over the break. She praised one student because she

used great descriptive words, she told the student, "ooh, and a lot of detail in that writing. I bet a lot of you can relate to it because so many of you have been there before." At this moment she was teaching text – to real life connections, and she was teaching self – to real life connections. Using other textbooks to relate to the story of the week – the story was about the great depression – she read passages from two different books and an article from a website

She modeled how to find words we did not know – she incorporated poetry into the weekly lesson plans. She tied in her writing piece with the story, explaining how they all have a main idea, supporting detail and a conclusion. She also stated how writing had to have an opening sentence along with a closing sentence. She was tying all of this together in her weekly lessons."
–Source: Excerpted Field Notes, April, 2007

As noted in the field notes above, Teacher #1 tied in her weekly themes by teaching students how to relate the text to real world connections besides relating the text to them. She also combined her teachings with the theme book by incorporating writing, reading passages from other books, and teaching the students the concept that all stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. This was taught to the students in whole group lessons and in their writing assignments.

Teacher #2

Likewise, Teacher #2 exhibited a variety of reading-based strategies that enhanced student engagement and exposure to reading. The excerpts below are from field notes I took while observing Teacher #2.

Strategies:

Before introducing the theme story of the week, Teacher #2 had the students review the rules of how to summarize. They have learned a system in which they use their fingers to tell the

teacher how to summarize a story. The students hold up their hand and point to their fingers. The thumb represents character, Mr. Thumbkin, he's quite a character. The index finger is setting, the students point to an imaginary table and say, 'wow, look at that gorgeous place setting.' The middle finger represents problem. The students say, 'If we hold up our middle finger in class, you will have a problem with that.' The ring finger represents events; we wear our wedding ring on this finger and that is a big event. The last part of summarizing is ending, which is represented by the pinky; because there are no more fingers; therefore, the end. The students then used this to help write a paragraph which summarized about the story. They can choose one of the five items to write about. This tool helps students when they are writing about what they have read. During this week of observing Teacher #2, the theme story of the week was called Boomtown. She started the week by introducing the title of the story and informing the students it was a continuing theme of good neighbors. She informed them the story was historical fiction and she asked students what did that mean. Her students raised hands and gave their interpretation of historical fiction. One student's answer was that it's about history and it could have happened. The teacher relates the movie *Titanic* as historical fiction. The sinking of the ship was true but the love story was made up. She also discussed the *Tree House* series of Jack and Annie; she said they always go back in time to learn about history but we know that we really can't go back in time. Again she used several examples of historical fiction where students could make self-connections to other texts and text-to-text connections.

Grouping:

During the time spent with Teacher #2, I noticed how she taught vocabulary words as well. She had groups take turns writing definitions and the students then shared with their classmates how they found the definition and they were expected to put it in their own words or summarize. The

students used these phrases, 'I read around the word.', 'I had to reread the word.', and 'I looked at the words in context.' After they had finished their vocabulary words the students were expected to hold onto their cards because latter in the week they would play a game using their cards similar to memory. The students pulled the definition out of the hat and then they had to flip over two cards. If the same two words are drawn and the word matches the definition the student gets to pick up the card. This is another way to reinforce vocabulary words and it gave the students a chance for hands on learning versus sitting at the desk writing the words down on a worksheet.

Guided Reading:

Teacher #2 also uses NW MAP scores to form her reading groups based on their current reading level. Students were broken into groups of three and four. The day they broke into guided reading groups, I observed students using graphic organizers to put down their thoughts before they had to write their paragraphs. Students who finished quickly were instructed to go back and write a more descriptive paragraph. She reinforced to the students she was not concerned about spelling at this point. She emphasized the hamburger strategy – she was looking for main idea, supporting details and conclusion.

Writing Assignments:

The first day I observed their writing assignment was also a weekend review of what the students had done. When I first walked in the students were walking around looking at each other's work. Teacher #2 believed this helped them see what good writing looks like as well as what doesn't work in writing. Also, having the students read each other's work they could see what their classmates and friends had done over the weekend. It has social benefits as well as educational benefits. While the students were walking around she was reminding them to look

for the hamburger bun. The main idea and conclusion was the bun, and the hamburger was the supporting detail. She incorporated weekly writing assignments which helped students relate to the texts they were reading (Source: Field notes, April, 2007).

As recorded in the field notes above, Teacher #2 tied in various reading strategies to the theme story they read the week I observed them. She constantly asked students to summarize, what strategies they used when they were reading their story and she constantly praised her students for doing excellent work. She also modeled for the students when she used strategies they had been learning. She also demonstrated how she used the test scores to base her reading groups so she could effectively teach to all of her students based upon their needs. She was able to use these test scores to establish a benchmark of where her students were, so she could meet them at their level.

Teacher #3

Although Teacher #3 was the most inexperienced of the three teachers, she seemed to benefit from the years of experience of her colleagues and her reading training. The excerpted field notes below demonstrate that Teacher #3 also had a commitment to research-based practices. This commitment would make implementation of RTI more likely because many of the practices required by RTI were already found in her classroom.

Strategies:

One of the whole group lessons I observed during my week with teacher #3 was doing a lesson on inference. She had given the students all leveled books but at lower levels so everyone could have success making inferences. The goal of the lesson was to come up with inferences and to come up with questions your partner would have to try and answer. Before the exercise started she read a book and modeled how to make inferences. She read from the story *The Big*

Snowball. She had the students make predictions in their heads before she started reading as to what might happen in the story. For example, this was an exchange she had with her students – teacher #3, 'there is snow on the ground and they're dressed warm.' The student replied, 'it's winter out.' Teacher #3 replies, 'How do you know, I never said it was winter.' The student replied 'I can tell by looking at the picture in the book plus the description you gave me makes me think it is winter out.' This was an example of working with students and teaching them the strategy of inferring. This exercise continued for about 45 minutes and the students eventually were paired with another student to do the assignment. Each partner would read the same book and they would have to make up an inference question that their partner would have to answer. While the students completed this assignment she checked their work to ensure they had indeed come up with an inference question. She was doing this outside assignment to collaborate with the theme book which the objective was to make inferences. I was impressed how she took an activity which helped reinforce the concept which was to be learned by the students, namely, how to make an inference. Along with the other two teachers I observed how teacher #3 used additional texts to help students make text-to-text connections, text-to-self connections and text-to-real world connections.

Grouping:

During my week observing Teacher #3, she did limited small-group work. She did have a day set aside for guided reading but she said she usually does not do small groups when working on the theme book (Harcourt). However, when asking questions about what they had read, she did have the students do a pair and share to talk about what they had read or what they learned.

Guided Reading:

When I observed teacher #3 during guided reading, she had based her groups similar to teachers #1 and #2. She had taken the data from the NW MAP tests to make her reading groups based on where they are to help them succeed in reading. When the students are reading in groups, they have a graphic organizer that helped them record their thoughts and then they wrote down a summary of what they had read. On this day, the students were given Venn Diagrams to compare and contrast the main characters in the stories they had read. Once the students had completed the reading, they were to write down how the characters were similar and different. For the writing assignment which went along with the guided reading the students were expected to write down their main idea, supporting details and a closing statement. Teacher number three referred to this strategy as a Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich or a PBJ. The bread was the main idea and the conclusion, the PB&J is the supporting details. Again, this was another way the teacher combined reading and writing activities to help students comprehend what they had read.

Writing Assignments:

During this week, teacher #3 incorporated a writing assignment which used "author's purpose". Another objective they were to learn in addition to making inferences was to explain what the "author's purpose" was. The teacher had the students conference with their neighbors to see if they knew the three things which make up "authors purpose". The students then raised their hands and she called on three different students to find out what they knew about "author's purpose". The students' reiterated author's purpose was to inform, persuade and to entertain. For their writing assignment, the students then were to write a paragraph using one of the author's purposes. She started the lesson by modeling her writing and the students guessed what she was trying to do. She was trying to inform them about the products available at Target. For the next

twenty minutes the students worked on their paragraphs and once the students handed their

paragraph over to their classmate, Teacher #3 read it to make sure the paragraph they wrote

matched the type of "author's purpose" they had intended to do: either persuade, entertain or

inform their reader.

During this portion of her reading block, I was excited to see how teacher #3 integrated

the weekly object with a practical writing assignment. The students were able to relate to the

concept of what author's purpose was by making them become authors. All of her students were

able to perform this task, even though some had more trouble than others. She differentiated the

instruction by requiring students who were weaker in writing only to write five sentences and she

gave them a sentence starter. Students who did not struggle writing during this assignment were

encouraged to write more sentences."

As noted in the field notes above, Teacher #3 worked with students incorporating writing

assignments related to their theme reading for the week by asking students to write using one of

the three "author's purpose". All of the students were able to complete this task at hand because

she modeled how to do this assignment. Because Teacher #3 taught inference and modeled it for

two days the students were able to what it looked like and then the students were able to apply

this lesson with their reading partner by doing an assignment with their reading partner. The first

day she modeled for them how it looks. The following day, students used what they had learned

the previous day to make inferences with their story by asking questions of their partner readers.

Because the teachers were all focused on assessment, they demonstrated a few examples

they used to assess their students. This was very important to witness because effective teaching

involves good assessments and RTI states that part of good teaching is using assessments to

analyze students and deciding how to go about teaching students based upon their assessments.

Part II – Focus on Assessment

All of the third grade teachers used weekly assessments based upon the themed story the students read during the week to measure the student's comprehension of the text and to monitor their growth throughout the semester. In addition, the teachers noted in interviews that they conducted three assessments based on reading through the usage of the NW MAP Tests. They have the students complete this test in the fall, winter and spring. According to all three teachers, once the teachers received the results from the tests, they could determine what each individual student's strengths and weaknesses were to create individual or small group lessons for the struggling students. The teachers utilized this information because the data affected the decision of how to teach to the students. This was expected of them by the administration and the district. Teachers also noted in interviews that during the course of their reading block, the teachers had students use graphic organizers to write down their thoughts and reactions to the stories they read. Students who needed additional help went to the reading lab to work on a reading program which offers intensive instruction during a fifteen minute period. These students went to this lab everyday during the school year. When the students caught up to their grade level, the parents were sent a letter stating the child's progress, and the parents determined if they wanted their child to continue with the reading program.

Additionally, the teachers worked with the students on Wednesday by reviewing the end of the unit assessment located in the students workbook. The teachers instructed the students to go to this test so they could review the questions. The teachers never gave out the answers; however, they did have the students look over the test so they could discuss the questions at hand. The teacher asked the students if the answers were "right there", "on my own" or "think and search". If an answer is an "on my own", the teachers asked their students what does that

mean. The students replied that the answer is not obvious, that you have to infer what the answer might be. The students were learning the concept of trying to read between the lines or what was the author really trying to say without really saying it. Teacher #3 told me that making inferences was one of the hardest concepts for children to grasp. They were just introducing this concept to the students.

For example, when Teacher #3 was working with her students on the end-of-the-unit test, she was asking them what type of question came up the most. After looking over the 20 questions, the students all agreed that most of the questions were "Right There" answers. She asked them if they had to look back for the answers if they were a "right there" answer. The students said, "No." She was helping them learn an effective strategy for recalling when taking a test and when trying to remember items they were reading in the story. During a whole group activity, the teacher was stirring her paint can and in the paint can there were various reading strategies the students have been learning. As she stirred the sticks in the can, she told the students the following:

"Our brains are doing all of these things in the can, reading really is thinking. Reading is all about cracking the code, when you read – you are doing more than that, the brain is different from a computer." She explained to the students that we can not remember everything but we can use our tools to help us recall certain events and even if we can't remember everything we can always look back at what we read. She was trying to teach them it is okay to go over what we read just like it is okay to go back and read over anything a second time, especially on tests. She was very good about teaching students the practicalities of taking tests and reading.

Part III – Intervention for Struggling Readers

According to interview data, Teacher #1 and Teacher #2 work together with students in the afternoon who they refer to as the students who "Do Not Qualify (DNQ)" or the ones who are "falling through the cracks." According to these teachers, during the last half-hour of the day, the two teachers will pull three students out of class who do not qualify for any services and they work with them on reading skills and strategies. According to teachers, when the one teacher is working with her small group, the other teacher takes her students to the library so she can do a read aloud to the entire third grade class (about 75 students in all). The teacher working with the small group uses leveled reading books so students are reading at their appropriate grade level.

In the last half-hour of their day, I observed Teacher #2 pull three students out of her class to work on reading skills, during this time the other teacher in this study was doing a read aloud with all of her students and the remaining students from the classroom of Teacher #2. Typically, Teacher #2 pulled struggling students in the afternoon to work on their reading. She usually worked with three students at a time. She used leveled reading books to help improve their reading ability, fluency, and comprehension. She gave students graphic organizers that helped them put down their thoughts from the reading. The students recorded what they had read and the organizers helped these students put them in a chronological order which they can in turn use to write down a paragraph of what they had read in their own words. She also asked them questions about what they were reading; she asked them to explain in their own words what they had read. She modeled strategies for the students. For example, she started reading a story about a family who moved. Before the story started, she asked the question, "I wonder why the family has to move?" With this question, the boys started to come up with ideas. As they did

this, she wrote down their words on the oversized tablet paper. She kept giving positive encouragement when she transferred their ideas on to the paper.

After observing the third grade team and the work they are doing, many of the actions they are doing on their own meet what the Regional Resource Center considers important when and if a school should implement an RTI program, according to their Information Sheet for Response-to-Intervention Models (June 2003, pg 2). Currently, the third grade team is doing steps "a" through "g". According to the Regional Resource Center (2003) schools with the following characteristics are likely to be successful when implementing RTI:

a) students receive high quality instruction in their general education setting;

b) general education instruction is research-based;

c) school staff conduct universal screening of academics and behavior;

d) frequent progress monitoring of student performance occurs;

e) frequent progress monitoring pinpoints students' specific difficulties;

f) school staff implement specific interventions to address the students' difficulties;

g) school staff uses progress-monitoring data to determine interventions' implementation integrity and effectiveness and to make any modifications as needed;

h) the RTI model is well described in written documents (so that the procedures and criteria used in schools can be compared to the documents); and

i) Sites can be designated as using a "standardized" treatment protocol that can be combined with an individualized, problem-solving model.

In summary, I have observed the following during reading blocks: the third-grade teachers are using researched-based practices by following school district curriculum, teaching comprehension, inference, summarizing, main idea, and self questioning. They presented

balanced instruction, a mix of whole group, small group, guided reading and implemented writing assignments which were related to the theme book of the week. In addition, teachers used constant and continuous assessment to chart student progress. Finally, teachers, on their own initiative, provided intensive reading instruction to students who were most in need. In conclusion, having observed the entire third-grade team at the designated school, it appears experienced teachers would be able to implement a RTI program, provided they already have previously used research-based practice, assessment, and intervention strategies in their classroom.

Discussion

This is what I have learned over the course of the past year studying RTI. RTI is a program to help struggling students in reading get the necessary help at an early stage of a student's school career. Under the current method, by using the discrepancy model to label students as learning disabled (LD), we are using a "wait-to-fail" approach for students who struggle with reading. Parents of struggling readers are told their son or daughter should wait until roughly the fourth grade to see if their child will grow out of their reading problem. Instead, RTI addresses students who struggle earlier rather than later. The problem with the current situation is that the students who get help by the fourth or fifth grade are still at the first or second grade level. By using RTI in the primary grades, educators can address any problems the struggling student has and develop intensive lesson plans specific to that child's needs.

As new as RTI is, the burden of RTI will fall upon the hands of the general education teacher; even though most of the current research being done about RTI is coming from the Special Education sector in education. In theory, RTI will help reduce "false positives" of students being unfairly labeled as SLD and it will immediately address the issue regarding students who are struggling. If RTI can help reduce the number of students being referred to special education then it will help reduce the overall costs in special education.

To effectively implement an RTI program, the experts agree that a multi-tiered system is required. The most common RTI program contains three tiers. The first tier is where the general education teacher continues to work with struggling readers using research-based curriculum in an intensive setting with three students or less for a total of not more than thirty minutes at least three times a week.

RTI consists of a variety of strategies, but often includes – 1) teachers using research-based curriculum to teach effective reading strategies, 2) teachers use of assessments, and 3) interventions for struggling readers. Based on the data I found in my action research, teachers who are using or practicing good teaching strategies using research-based curriculum, who use multiple means of assessments and participate in class with their own type of intervention for struggling readers - such as guided reading - then these teachers should not have any problem implementing an RTI program in their classroom because they are already doing what is expected of teachers who use RTI with struggling readers. Effective teachers practicing good teaching methods should not have any problems adjusting to a program like RTI. Having experienced and effective teachers should make the transition easier because the teacher would know what to do and expect.

For future studies, I would be interested in studying experienced teachers versus inexperienced teachers when it comes to implementing RTI. I would want to know if the inexperienced teachers would have the same success as the experienced teacher when using RTI in the classroom.

Self-Reflection

Last summer while working on my reading license, I was informed I needed to write a ten page paper on reading. I had no idea what to write. I am fortunate enough that my wife who is a reading teacher told me there is a new topic in the education field called Responsiveness to Intervention or RTI. I had no idea what it was about. I went to the online resource library at Augsburg and did a journal search for RTI. I found only a few articles but there was enough there to get my paper started. After I had finished my paper, my professor and academic advisor told me I should take this paper and use it for my launching pad for my action research. Almost one year later here I am with a thesis on RTI and the teachers' perceptions of implementing an RTI program. I would never have thought this casual conversation with my wife would balloon into something this life changing for me.

This past spring I was hired to teach third grade in a small western Wisconsin town. One of the reasons they decided to hire me was because they are trying to implement RTI in their school district. They stated they are in the Tier One stage. They are trying to figure out how to implement stage two and stage three. They are looking for teachers to join their RTI committee to help them get this off the ground. Because I explained to them my graduate thesis happened to be on RTI, they called me in for an interview and now this fall I will be expected to join their RTI committee. I am really excited that I was able to choose a topic that had relevance and practical means to apply in my career once I leave Augsburg College. I am looking forward to continue studying RTI and staying abreast of the journal articles which seem to be appearing almost monthly now.

As a general education teacher I must be cognizant of my students' reading abilities. I must be proactive in assessing my students on a regular basis. I must work closely with the

reading specialist and special education staff in my building. Because this is a new topic in the education field it is best if I stay abreast of any articles which relate to RTI to see what the current research has determined is working or not working for teachers and/or students. After observing the third grade team at my building, I realize how much coordination and cooperation must take place for the two full-time third grade teachers. Their willingness to take each other's 35 students on top of your own 35 students for a half-hour so the other teacher can work with struggling readers three times a week is sheer dedication. Instead of being frustrated at the current conditions in their school district – declining enrollment, larger class-sizes, teacher layoffs, they are making the extra effort to ensure all of their students are getting the support they need, even though at this school the funds are not there. To me, this is what exemplifies dedication to others. These teachers are working with what they have; they are not giving up on the students at all. They believe their students can achieve anything they put their minds to. One of the teachers told me the day she gives up on her students is the day she needs to get out of teaching.

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Appendix A

Survey Questions for Responsiveness to Intervention

Question 1 – Please write down what you know about Responsiveness to Intervention.

Question 2 – How would you feel if you were ask to change the way you taught reading to students who were considered struggling readers?

Questions 3 – How do you teach reading to your students currently? (i.e. whole group, small groups, ability based groups, mixed abilities).

Question 4 – How many minutes do you teach reading?

Question 5 – How do you stay abreast of current reading strategies? (i.e. professional journals, workshops, collaborate with other colleagues)

Question 6 – Do you belong to any professional organizations, particularly ones which promote reading?

Appendix B

Formal Interview Questions for Participants

Question 1 - After learning more about RTI, what are your thoughts?

Question 2 – If RTI is introduced in your district what supports will you and your classroom need?

Question 3 – Do you see any potential drawbacks from RTI?

Question 4 – Do you feel RTI will decrease Special Education referrals?

Question 5 – What more would you like to know about RTI?