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# The Effectiveness of Response to Intervention to Improve High School Students' Reading Skills

Ann-Marie Popwell  
*Walden University*

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Ann-Marie Popwell

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2014

Abstract

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to Improve High School Students' Reading Skills

by

Ann-Marie Popwell

MA, Walden University, 2006

BS, Mercer University, 2004

Doctoral Study Submitted in Fulfillment  
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Doctor of Education

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September 2014

## Abstract

High School students in a local school district were having reading-related difficulties in certain subject areas and were at risk of failing high school courses. Success in reading is important because students must read the content within the End of Course Test in core content subjects, and their success on this test determines their eligibility for high school graduation. The purpose of the study was to examine the effectiveness of a Response to Intervention (RTI) reading class designed to improve reading skills for at-risk high school students. The constructivist learning theory was the theoretical framework for this study. The research questions addressed how teachers conceptualized RTI as it applied to students' performance in the reading intervention class and the benefits and challenges of the reading class. The research design was a qualitative instrumental case study with the reading class serving as the case. Data were collected from semistructured interviews with 7 educators, reading work samples, and RTI data from the school. Data were analyzed via open coding techniques to determine emergent themes. The findings indicate that the reading class was not effective in improving students' reading. Recommendations include creating reading resources, promoting a professional development plan for teachers, and designing or refining a reading curriculum. The implications for positive social change include better mastery of grade-level content reading, improved instructional practices and RTI intervention, improved students' scores on state assessments, and higher numbers of high school graduates.



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## Dedication

I am honored to be a part of the lineage of strong, courageous, prayerful women as my deceased grandmother Violet, my mother Pamela, and my mother-in-law Shirley. Without their example and guidance, I would not be where I am today. I have gleaned from each of these exemplary females who taught me that nothing is impossible when you believe you can do it with God at the helm. To them I will be forever grateful. Finally, my biggest fans and cheerleaders are my husband Ainsley, my son Ainsley Jr, and my daughters Abigail and Ariel. This academic accomplishment is dedicated to them and our future generation as an example to never give up on your hopes and dreams, because all things are possible to those who believe that they can be accomplished. "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Phillipians 4:13



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## Section 1: Introduction to the Study

Recent educational reforms have been implemented by the federal government that demands greater accountability at the teacher, student, school, and district level (Quality Counts, 2004). These include the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act (Title 1), the Carl D. Perkins Act, Goals 2000, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. Their common goal is to provide additional support for students who are struggling in the classroom (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2009; Gerzel-Short & Wilkins, 2009). According to the USDOE, some of NCLB goals are to close the academic achievement gap by using best practices of what works, describe what methods will be used, ensure all students reach academic proficiency, and use data from the school district annual report card to inform stakeholders about the school's progress.

With the implementation of NCLB, each state is required to test and document students' academic progress at public schools. In one Southeastern state, elementary and middle school students' NCLB assessment is the Criterion Reference Competency Test (CRCT). For high schools, it is two assessments: The End of Course Test (EOCT) and the state's High School Graduation Test (HSGT). These standardized state tests measure competency in content areas and are requirements for promotion and graduation based in the Georgia Department of Education (GADOE) standards (GADOE, 2009). Additionally, standardized tests can also serve as a means of identifying students' strengths and weaknesses, and test results can be used to recommend remediation. Yet, in spite of recent efforts, schools' inability to narrow the academic achievement gap



continues to be an area of considerable concern at the state and national level (Fletcher, Coulter, Reschley, & Vaughn, 2004). At the state level, legislators' concern about public school education and the nation's educational gains prompted the creation of an intervention program known as Response to Intervention (RTI) geared toward targeting and improving at-risk students' achievement (Burns, Jacob & Wagner, 2008; Desimone, 2002). To address this concern, some schools have implemented RTI to assist students in their areas of literacy difficulty.

RTI was implemented in schools on a large scale basis when IDEA was introduced in 2004 and NCLB incorporated early intervention support to struggling students in public schools (Wright, 2007). However, researchers have placed more emphasis on the implementation of RTI at elementary grade levels (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006, 2007). For instance, at elementary levels, federal funds have been provided to states and local school districts to create reading intervention programs from kindergarten through third grade (Katz, Stone, Carlise, Corey, & Zeng, 2008). At the high school level, early intervention is administered in the general education classroom through RTI for students who may have learning difficulties (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). In other words, RTI is a customized approach to intervention geared toward struggling students in the general or regular education setting. Additionally, specialized intervention is implemented based on students' progress (Riley-Tillman, Kalberer, & Chafouleas, 2005).

This study focused on the implementation of a reading class to improve at-risk students' reading through the RTI process. Once these students are identified as having reading difficulties, preparation is made to implement early intervention to bring them

back on track to be reading at their grade level (Vaughn et al., 2009). Case studies by Allington (2006), Ambe (2007), Biancrosa and Snow (2006), Rance-Roney (2010), and Smith (2007) are some examples of research related to reading difficulties and interventions. These, along with the causes of poor reading among high school students and RTI interventions, will be discussed at length in Section 2.

Most research on RTI has been focused on the elementary level; however, more emphasis needs to be placed on developing RTI frameworks that are research-based at the high school level (Johnson, Mellard & Byrd, 2005). In some instances, there is no clear cut definition of how RTI should work in high schools. Samuels (2009) noted that research based evidence of what the RTI model should look like is lacking at the high school level. Nonetheless, both elementary and high school students profit from the interventions that address their needs in academic deficits which can result in failure. Shores and Bender (2007) noted that RTI's procedures are based on instructional practices that are scientifically based and high in quality, but more so, are a barometer for measuring growth and effectiveness. These instructional practices can be differentiated to meet the learning needs of the students while monitoring their progress and adjusting instruction accordingly.

Duffy (2007) noted that RTI has great potential and is a pinpoint focus for intervention at high schools. At the research site, the specific intervention is a reading class for at-risk students with reading difficulties. Students in high school are reading for content mastery and comprehension. These students need a collection of reading strategies that include prereading activities, fluency, and word study to help them make

meaning of text (Rasinski et al., 2005). Researchers have noted that students with poor reading comprehension and reading skills often become frustrated when reading difficult text and do poorly in course work (Booth, 2006; Lesesne, 2006; Tovani, 2004).

Additionally, high school students need a collection of reading strategies that include prereading activities, fluency, and word study to help them understand what they are reading (Rasinski et al., 2005; Tovani, 2004; Vacca, 2006). Furthermore, the complexity and level of text difficulty makes it necessary to utilize instructional approaches that help students make meaning from their reading (Rasinski et al., 2005; Tovani, 2004). Applegate and Modla (2009) noted that students must be able to engage in critical thinking and also make inferences from what they read. In other words, high school students are expected to be able to read at grade level and understand and make meaning of course content as they advance in grade levels. Critical to the quality education that high school students are expected to receive is the ability to examine and understand a multiplicity of disciplines.

The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES; 2007) stated in a report that 27% of 12<sup>th</sup> grade students could not read a variety of course texts and that there was a decrease in student literacy. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the number of 12<sup>th</sup> graders performing at or above basic level dropped from 80% in 1992 to 73% in 2005, the last testing year until the 2010 report. Additionally, students who are 20 times more at risk of dropping out of high school are 9<sup>th</sup> graders who entered high school with a reading achievement in the lower 20 percent. This was supported by a reading study from the National Association of Secondary School

Principals (NASSP). The study revealed that for the 59 % of 9<sup>th</sup> graders who graduated, the potential dropout rate was 43 percent. The conclusion was that lower reading skills students were in jeopardy of not graduating. Finally, results of the 2007 NAEP indicated that the nation's public schools average score was 261 and Georgia's average score was 259 (NCES, 2007).

Based on these statistics, reading and writing instruction must continue through high school with targeted intervention for students who struggle with literacy (NASSP, 2009). For these reasons, reading intervention through RTI is needed for high school students. The literature review in Section 2 discusses the reading problems of high school students identified through the RTI process. It gives an overview of RTI, its models, tiers, and approaches. It also examines the effectiveness of a reading program to improve students' reading for comprehension

### **Problem Statement**

The problem that existed at the research setting was that some students were having significant difficulties understanding text content in more than one subject area. This was evident from the term grade posting for November, 2011 that indicated a high failure rate in all content areas.

At the end of every term, the graduation coach sends out a report on all students' passing and failing grades. Term results are broken down by grade levels of all enrolled students, both readers and at-risk readers. Bell (2011) sent out the following school report: First, the total number of 9th graders tested was 401. Two hundred and fifty one of those students or 62.59% were failing one or more classes. Of those failing, 89 were

failing three or more classes, representing 34.4% of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade failures. Forty two of those failing were second year 9<sup>th</sup> graders, and at least four were in their third year of high school. Second, of the 360 total 10<sup>th</sup> graders, 262 or 72.77% were failing one or more classes. One hundred and one were failing three or more classes, representing 38.5% of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade failures. Third, of the 298 total 11<sup>th</sup> graders, 211 or 70.8% were failing one or more classes. Thirty-four were failing three or more classes, representing 25.1% of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade failures. Finally, of the 260 total 12<sup>th</sup> graders, 136 or 52.3% were failing one or more classes. Thirty four were failing three or more classes, representing 25% of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade failures (Bell, 2011).

Students who fail three or more classes are considered “at-risk” and are targeted for intervention, including students with reading difficulties. These students are identified by the school’s Student Support Team (SST) and are targeted for Tier 2 RTI intervention. In order to meet the needs of these students, a reading intervention class was created for the 2011-2012 school year. Since this was the first year of the class implementation, tracking data on students’ progress was imperative for improving the program to ensure that students made gains toward positive outcomes.

For the past 3 years, the school did not meet adequate yearly progress (AYP; GADOE, 2010). At the research site, RTI had been implemented for at least 4 consecutive years; however, 2011-2012 was the first year a specific class had been designated for reading intervention. The first semester had been challenging for the reading class since several students in the class did not improve their reading, and some dropped out of the class before the end of the semester. As a result, effective reading

intervention within the RTI model must be addressed in order to have successful continuation of the class and improved reading across the curriculum.

### **Nature of the Study**

This study employed a qualitative case study using interviews and deidentified students' class work to look at the effectiveness of a reading class that was implemented to improve reading of at-risk students with reading difficulties. One main characteristic of case studies is the allowance made for researchers to concentrate on complex facets of investigative discoveries with the intent of understanding a phenomenon (Casey & Houghton, 2010).

Elements of this study were context-specific. This was supported by Kyburz-Graber (2004), who noted that case studies are often employed in research that focuses on education, with an emphasis on context-specific conditions where conclusions are made based on the generalization of findings. Moreover, ideas and themes are explored in the natural setting of the phenomenon. Yin (2009) also noted that case studies seek to understand aspects of an organization, group, individual, and a phenomenon. Flyvbjerg (2006) concluded that case studies focus on real-life phenomena, and the revelations derived from the findings. RTI and reading intervention was the phenomenon studied.

For many high school students who find reading to be challenging, completing the basic reading skills and thinking critically can be arduous. Richardson and Morgan (1994) proposed that in order to be an effective reader, content analysis must be ongoing and done independently. The results from such strategies will yield positive reading outcomes. Beers (2003) noted that effectively reading for understanding requires

purposeful, strategic effort whereby teachers can provide learning opportunities that address reading comprehension deficiencies for at-risk readers. If students are able to read for understanding, academic achievement may increase (Burns, 2001).

The first step in the process of determining eligibility for the reading class was teacher referral. Students who were underperforming in the general education classroom were referred to the RTI team who focused on students' strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles to implement best practices that may work for the individual student in whole group or individual settings. The RTI team members were the participants in the research, and there were no student participants. For this study, data collecting tools were participants' interviews, and documents of deidentified students' 9-week progress reports. All student information was deidentified because the students were not participants. Data collection tools, methods, and procedures are discussed in detail in Section 3. Some learning resources that were used to assist students in the reading intervention class were computer-based test preparation models, various grade level basic reading skills books, and one-on-one differentiated instruction.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative case study examined the effectiveness of a reading intervention program for at-risk readers at the high school level through the RTI model. The ensuing overarching question was the focus of the study: In what ways is the high school reading class effective in improving at-risk students' reading, and how could the program be improved?

Additionally, the following subquestions were addressed:

1. How do teachers teaching the reading class conceptualize RTI?
2. How does the RTI team conceptualize the reading class?
3. What have been the benefits and challenges of the reading class?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine whether the use of RTI was effective in improving reading skills of at-risk high school students with reading difficulties. Additionally, recommendations for next year's improvement for successful reading strategies and higher achievement for at-risk students with reading difficulties were made. In the reading intervention class, students were provided with direct reading instruction emphasizing comprehension attainment.

At the research site, some students who have difficulty with reading were given the opportunity to remedy the situation through the reading class. Some students embraced the opportunity, while others did not. I aimed to discover what role RTI played in improving students' reading from the perspectives of the intervention teachers, graduation coach, and RTI team members. McCook (2006) noted that if schools can pinpoint students who are failing at the term's beginning, there is greater opportunity for students to catch up without falling significantly behind and with less rigorous intervention strategies.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this research inquiry was based on the constructivist learning theory that takes into account the learner's individual needs (Benjamin, 2002). Theorists such as Piaget, Dewey, Vygotsky, and Bruner have



contributed to the constructivist theory of learning. Piaget (1971) and Dewey (1938) were the early theorists to develop the idea of constructivism; however, Vygotsky and Bruner made significant contributions to the theory's foundation. Piaget (1971) based his ideas of constructivism on his comprehension that children's psychological development occurs in stages where they derive meaning and construct learning through progression. Likewise, Dewey (1938) affirmed that learning occurs from doing or action. Piaget and Inhelder (1969) purported that the nature of knowing functions within the constructivist domain. As such, all new learning is intertwined into a schema or knowledge framework where new learning is established. According to Airasian and Walsh (1997), constructivism is viewed as a philosophy that investigates the nature, methods, and limits of human knowledge. On the other hand, Walker (2002) viewed constructivism as a theory of learning emanating out of a theory of knowing.

### **Constructivist Learning Theory**

Educators use the theoretical view of constructivism as a foundational basis for teaching and learning. In the constructivist classroom, a variety of teaching practices are employed to facilitate students' learning. One model of the theoretical view of constructivism in the classroom is small group instruction with a concentration on teaching reading skills and strategies. Benefits to the constructivist learning approach include differentiated instruction with small groups based on the ratio of student to teacher (Benjamin 2002; Tomlinson, 2001).

Differentiated instruction, according to Benjamin (2002), is the process where the students are active participants in the learning process rather than being passive learners.

Tomlinson (2003) believed that applying a differentiated approach to teaching helps students maximize their learning potential. Dantonio and Beisenherz (2001) noted that constructivism requires students to demonstrate their understanding by actively constructing their learning based on instructional methods that include strategies of differentiation. Once teachers are in tune with who they teach, they are more likely to be flexible in how they impart instruction (Tomlinson 2003). With constructivist pedagogy, students are allocated time to comprehend and apply new concepts to what they learned (Carpenter, 2003). In a constructivist classroom, the teacher becomes the facilitator as students continue to connect new information to prior knowledge and as they strive toward attaining meaningful goals (Alesandrini & Larson, 2002; Tomlinson, 2003). In essence, students learn by discovering their own answers in comparison to listening to a lecture. Tomlinson (2003) encouraged the use of differentiated instruction as a way for both teacher and students to maximize instruction. Bender (2008) noted that when the teacher and student can focus on the specific skill that challenges the student, and the teacher can closely monitor struggling students' progress, then RTI provides the strongest basis for differentiation of instruction. Hence, RTI is the second framework for this study.

### **RTI Framework**

RTI provides a substantiated framework of support for instructional improvement that would benefit students (Tilly, Harken, Robinson, & Kurns, 2008). Thus, RTI allows educators to utilize research-based instructional methods, strategies, and assessments in the classroom where assessments help teachers gauge students' learning phase and also help determine instructional effectiveness so changes can be made to facilitate learning

(Tilly, et al., 2008). According to Stecker, Fuchs, and Fuchs (2008), data that monitor students' progress and evaluate instructional practices based on students' performance should be a part of the RTI framework. For these reasons, RTI was the best framework to help me in the data collecting process. Hence, the conceptual framework to support this study was based on RTI, with an emphasis on the problem solving model.

Problem solving and standard protocol are two RTI models that have been widely implemented on a national level (GADOE, 2009). The problem solving model looks at student achievement to implement interventions and evaluate student performance after intervention. The standard protocol model uses predetermined interventions in a specific order with students who are identified as at-risk. According to the Georgia Department of Education, both models are a strong structure that supports student achievement (GADOE, 2009).

The RTI program used was a tiered framework designed to identify and assist struggling students (GADOE, 2009), and was aimed to resolve students' reading difficulties through a multitiered instruction model (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). The use of Tier 2 intervention from the three instructional tiers in the RTI model was explored. In the models, Tier 1 provides instructional and behavioral support for students who are experiencing difficulty in the general education setting. Tier 2 provides more specialized instructional support where teams can vary or customize the instruction based on student need. Tier 3 provides a comprehensive student evaluation for those who experience significant academic difficulties, and is also used to determine eligibility for special education services (National Joint Commission on Learning

Disabilities, 2005). Hiebert and Taylor (1994) noted that two options are derived from research: Students either master established reading goals or the intervention stops because of lack of progress. If the latter occurs, other reading treatments are considered. The qualitative design included collecting data from term reports to determine the progress of at-risk students with reading difficulties referred for intervention through the RTI model.

Finally, the conceptual framework of the constructivist learning theory and RTI was best for this research because students are actively involved in their learning, and their needs are a priority in these frameworks. Consideration of the framework helped in determining and narrowing the questions for the study. Through small group instruction, differentiated instruction, knowledge acquisition, and tiered intervention, students who are academically at risk and need reading intervention benefited from the framework's attributes. These attributes were a determining factor for the data collection tools used. They also provided evidence that assisted with interviewing, collecting, sorting, and analyzing data. As the research developed, themes unfolded. These themes were organized by categories, coded, and analyzed.

### **Definition of Terms**

For this study, the operational definitions of technical terms are defined:

*Acceleration:* Interventions that are implemented to increase the speed at which students acquire skills (GADOE, 2009)

*Adequate Yearly Program (AYP):* A measurement defined by the United States Federal No Child Left Behind Act that allows the U.S. Department of Education to

determine how every public school and school district in the country is performing academically (GADOE, 2009).

*Assessment:* Assessment is a broad term used to describe the collection of information about student performance in a particular area. Assessments can be formative or summative (GADOE, 2009).

*At-risk students:* Students whose “initial performance level or characteristics predict poor learning outcomes unless intervention occurs to accelerate knowledge, skill, or ability development” (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010).

*Content area:* A content area refers to a school subject area, such as science, social studies, math, or English (Alger, 2007).

*Data-based Instruction:* An instructional approach in which student performance data are used to assess the effectiveness of the instruction and to make changes in instruction based on data (GADOE, 2009).

*Differentiation:* Differentiation is a broad term referring to the need of educators to tailor the curriculum, teaching environments, and practices to create appropriately different learning experiences for students. To differentiate instruction is to recognize students’ varying interest, readiness levels, and learning profiles and to react responsively. Curriculum can be differentiated in content, process, products, and learning environment (GADOE, 2009).

*Fidelity:* Fidelity refers to the provision or delivery of instruction in the manner in which it was designed or prescribed according to the specifications of the developer or researcher. Other related terms to fidelity are intervention integrity or treatment integrity,

which often refers to the same principle (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010).

*Interventions:* Targeted instruction that is based on student needs. Interventions supplement the general education curriculum. Interventions are a systematic compilation of well researched or evidence-based specific instructional strategies and techniques (GADOE, 2009).

*Progress monitoring:* Progress monitoring is a scientifically based practice that is used to assess students' academic performance and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction (GADOE, 2009).

*Reading comprehension:* Reading comprehension is the process of understanding written language (Snow, 2002).

*Reading intervention:* A reading intervention is one or more techniques, strategies, programs, and supports intended to prevent or remediate reading difficulties (Snow, 2002; Tummer, 2007).

*Response to intervention (RTI):* RTI is a method of academic intervention that is designed to provide early, effective assistance to struggling students. Placement into the program is based on progress monitoring results from assessments (Council for Exceptional Children, 2007).

*Tiered service-delivery model:* A multitiered model of service delivery in which instruction is differentiated to meet learner needs at various levels. Several specific factors or dimensions help distinguish among interventions at the various tier levels. In general, a higher degree of specificity and intensity is associated with a higher

tier of intervention (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2010).

*Tier 1:* The first level of a multitiered model, which is the core curriculum within the general classroom instruction with grade-level expectations for all students (Moore, 2008).

*Tier 2:* The second level of a multitiered model of instruction, which involves the identification of students not making adequate progress within Tier I followed by prescribed intervention with ongoing progress monitoring of the intervention's effectiveness (Moore, 2008).

*Tier 3:* The third level of intervention, which is the most intensive layer of general education support following unresponsiveness to Tier 2 intervention (Moore, 2008). In some models, however, a progression to Tier 3 indicates a shift from general education due to a suspected disability and a provision for special education services (Powers et al., 2008).

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions as noted by Gay and Airasain (2000) are any fact that can be presumed to be true without verification of its authenticity. For this study, the first assumption was that teachers will know who members of the RTI team are at the site, and those teachers will have a clear understanding of the RTI process. Another assumption was that students who are at risk are taught by certified content area teachers and that students' instruction is in alignment with GPS requirements. Another assumption was that both teachers and administrators are knowledgeable about monitoring students' progress so that the effectiveness of the intervention will be ascertained. A final

assumption was that data reported by the school for students' scores on standardized tests were accurate.

### **Limitations**

Creswell (2003) noted that limitations are potential weaknesses in a study. This research was limited to one high school in the southeastern United States. One limitation involved time since the study was conducted within an 8-week period. This time constraint prevented the use of a longitudinal study which may have provided more accurate recording of data on strategies for successful implementation and desired academic results. Another limitation to the study involved utility of the framework. This was difficult because many versions of the constructivist framework exist. According to Gordon (2009), major differences and complexities exist among the versions, which may make it challenging to implement, practice, and accomplish in the classroom. Other limitations included the lack of benchmark tests to track students' progress over time. Additionally, students' underachievement in reading may be because of other contributing factors that teachers may not be aware of, and teachers may have preconceived notions about students who do not perform well academically. The research study was also limited to the how RTI was perceived by the participants. Because the participants have a good working relationship with me, their responses to the interview questions may have been influenced by that relationship since they may want me to be successful.



### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of a study takes into consideration broad areas to be researched based on generalization and the rationale of the study (Goertz & Mahoney, 2006). The scope of this research was limited to one high school in a geographic area in the South. This high school did not meet AYP for 3 years and was placed on the Needs Improvement (NI) list. The student population is 1,298, and the demographic makeup is 60% Black, 33% White, 4% Hispanic, 3% Multi Racial, and 1% Asian (GADOE, 2009). Typically, case studies focus on small number of participants. The invited participants were one administrator, one graduation coach, one counselor, and seven teachers.

Creswell (2003) noted that delimitations are used to narrow the scope of a study. A delimitation for this research was that that the study was not conducted in several schools but one high school. The implementation of RTI and a reading program in other high schools in the school district was not the focus of the study.

### **Significance of the Study**

The results are significant to administrators, schools, parents, teachers, and students. With government mandates, societal demands, and parental expectations for students learning and progress, NCLB (2002) and IDEA (1990) made new provisions that would encourage schools to implement research-based remediation programs such as RTI in the general education classrooms to assist struggling students (Wright, 2007). This is beneficial to schools, especially those who are in the initial stages of implementing an RTI reading class. Secondly, the information in this research may be used in the future to

help at-risk students make gains in their coursework, thus increasing their chances of being successful.

Additionally, the information may assist the school in identifying existing instructional weaknesses in the RTI reading class. The RTI team may share the data with teachers during professional learning, common planning, and department meetings. Since the school being studied met AYP after 3 years, the results of this study may be beneficial to the administrators, teachers, and parents, since the school does not want to regress to NI status. When the school was on the NI status, parents were given that information and the opportunity to transfer their children to designated schools within the school district that met AYP (GADOE, 2009). If students are passing their coursework, parents may regain confidence in the school's teaching practices and may not have to transfer their children to available schools that meet AYP within the district.

Lastly, the analysis of the reading achievement data determined whether students who struggle with high school course material benefited from the reading intervention class at the school. Results from a study conducted by Rozalski (2010) at a West Virginia high school indicated that the use of the RTI model was instrumental in improving students' reading abilities in all academic areas. The outcome of the study was to have improved reading achievement that positively affected course performance and promotion for at-risk students. Finally, students' morale may increase because of the additional scaffolding, mentoring, and overall investment into their academic success. The RTI team may determine whether it is beneficial to continue the class as designed or to revise the instructional methods in order to improve future students' performance.

### **Transition Statement**

Some schools have implemented intervention programs to assist students in their areas of literacy difficulty. One such program is RTI. This intervention program is a process that is facilitated through the use of multitiered models. This study explored the effectiveness of a reading intervention class in improving reading of at-risk high school students with reading difficulties. For many high school students who find reading to be challenging, completing the basic reading skills and thinking critically can be arduous. The study focused on the implementation of a reading class to improve at-risk students' reading through the RTI process. Identifying students' targeted weaknesses and monitoring students' progress provide guidance toward effective instruction. Once these students are identified as having reading difficulties, preparation is made to implement early intervention to bring them back on track to be reading at their grade level (Vaughn et al., 2009).

The ideal RTI model entails continuous progress monitoring, tracking data, utilizing research-based practices, providing specific interventions for at risk students, and maintaining effective instruction in the general education setting (Hollenbeck, 2007). According to Al Otaiba and Fuchs (2006), students who take part in an RTI tiered intervention for a period of 8 weeks are more likely to see an increase in their learning outcomes. Hence, it is the intention of the RTI team at the research site to monitor the progress of at-risk students with reading difficulties every 9 weeks based of progress reports.

Johnson et al (2005) noted that more research on RTI has been at the elementary

school level as opposed to the high school level. Samuels (2009) concurred that there is a lack of research based RTI frameworks in high schools. Additionally, Duffy (2007) asserted there is great potential for RTI at the high school levels. Shores and Bender (2007) concluded that RTI's growth is measured through scientifically based instructional practices that are a true barometer for measuring its effectiveness. These are discussed at length in Section 2 of the literature review. Section 3 outlines the sample population, methodology, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, findings of the study, and how the study was conducted. Section 4 provides the summary and conclusions, and Section 5 discusses recommendations for future study based on the findings of this research. Results from this research should benefit the school in identifying areas for improvement in high school RTI reading intervention for at-risk students.

## Section 2: Literature Review

The purpose of the study was to address the reading problems of high school students identified through the RTI process and to examine the effectiveness of the reading intervention class. The review on the scholarly literature focused on the descriptors of RTI and reading difficulties of at-risk readers at the high school level. The strategy used for searching the literature was acquiring and synthesizing information from the following databases: Google Scholar, Georgia Department of Education, Walden dissertations and thesis, Walden eLibrary, UMI dissertations publishing, and ProQuest databases. Peer reviewed articles were obtained from Academic search complete, EBSCOhost, ERIC, and ProQuest databases. Various search terms were used to collect information for the study. Some of these were *response to intervention, reading difficulties, at-risk readers, reading problems in high school, reading difficulties at the high school level, differentiated instruction, secondary education, and high school RTI.*

The first section of the literature review discussed the causes of poor reading among high school students. According to Denton et al. (2010), many students who currently obtain intervention through RTI receive this assistance because they have difficulty with reading. A report from NCES (2007) noted that students' basic reading level is less than proficient for grade level. The second section gave an overview of RTI. Mellard and Johnson (2008) asserted that using RTI enables educators to make better decisions based on data from high quality instruction. The third section dealt with the background of RTI, and the fourth discussed the RTI process. The fifth section outlined in detail the different models of RTI which included large scale models such as the

Pennsylvania's Instructional Support Team, Iowa's Heartland Area Education Agency, Ohio's Intervention Based Assessment, and the Minneapolis problem solving model. Within the RTI model, interventions are implemented to support students who are identified as having academic difficulties, and differentiated instruction is one of those supports in place to help facilitate students' success (Ardoin, Koeing,, Connell, & Witt, 2005; Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005; Fletcher, 2006). The sixth section discussed the problem solving and standard treatment approaches to RTI. The seventh section outlined the three tiers in the RTI models from two perspectives. From an identification perspective, RTI focuses on the student's qualities whereas a prevention perspective focuses on instructional qualities in relation to the student (Johnston, 2010). The eighth section outlined the school's role in RTI, and the ninth section discussed stakeholders' role in RTI. Stakeholders are the principal, teachers, other professionals, and parents. The final section discussed the concerns about RTI, and the summary concluded the literature review.

### **High School Students With Reading Difficulties**

High school students are expected to be academically adept to meet course requirements for promotion. Borasi and Siegel (2000) stated that high schools' curricula are designed with the expectation that students should be able to read and understand the concepts of content literature. However, not all students possess the knowledge base in content literacy. For some high school students, reading across the curriculum may be challenging because of content difficulty. Rampey, Dion, and Donahue (2009) asserted that approximately two thirds of eighth to 12th-grade students read at less than the

proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. Biancarosa (2006) contended that high school students are challenged to some degree by difficult text reading as well as greater learning expectations in content knowledge (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Brozo & Simpson, 2007).

Worthy and McKool (1996) noted that often high school students struggle with the interpretation and meaning of content found in text books and assignments. Some of these students labor over unfamiliar or technical vocabulary and may lack the ability to formulate questions, while those who cannot comprehend text may give up. Beers (2003) asserted that the challenge for these students is in text interpretation. Students must be able to think about what has been read, analyze it, and compare it to what is already known. Tovani (2000) stated that there are mostly two types of at-risk readers at the high school level: resistive readers and word callers. Resistive readers are those who choose not to read; word callers are those who can decode words, but cannot derive meaning or apply critical thinking to what has been read. As a result, words often become obstacles rather than bridges to understanding.

Some reading advocates (Allington, 2002; Greenleaf et al., 2001; Guthrie, Schafer, & Wang, 1995; Ivey, 1999; Pressley, 1997; Purcell-Gates et al., 2002) recommended a student-centered, constructivist approach to reading that is interdisciplinary in nature. Atwell (1998) and Carbo (1997) noted that reading initiatives should be developed for struggling readers. These researchers supported the use of challenging reading materials that are not overwhelming and relevant to student interest. Both researchers suggested that student interest in reading materials was linked to

motivation to read. The National Research Council (2004) agreed that motivation is an important factor for older students who continue to struggle with reading. Fletcher et al. (2006) claimed that there are good reasons for providing early intervention for younger students. However, improved knowledge about effective interventions for older students is needed. One of the significant issues related to providing standardized interventions to older students with reading difficulties is that the range of reading problems is greater than with younger students with reading difficulties. Consequently, for the vast majority of older readers with reading difficulties, intervention is likely to occur in group-sizes ranging from three to 18 students (Learned Individual Differences, 2008). Therefore, RTI should be used as a diagnostic approach to shaping instructional strategies for students who are not meeting grade level standards (Duffy, 2007).

As noted in Elliot (2008), research supports the core principles on which RTI is based and demonstrates the general effectiveness of RTI through the assumption that all students can learn, that educators must identify areas of concern at an early onset, and that classroom instruction must be differentiated in order for students to achieve high rates of success. For students with reading difficulties, challenges may be derived from one or a combination of the following: activating prior knowledge, vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and fluency. Students in the reading intervention class may have challenges in one or more of these areas. Torgesen et al. (2007) stressed that there is much need for secondary schools to utilize a combination of reading strategies for students who struggle with reading. Allington (2006) agreed that in order to make meaning of text, a combination of differing strategies will have to be in place.



One reading strategy to assist students with reading difficulties is activating prior knowledge. Students in the reading intervention class may experience difficulty making connecting what they have learned to what they are learning. Allington (2006) noted that when one activates prior knowledge, it is tapping into information already known and is making predictions before reading and during reading. A case study by Ambe (2007) on adolescent reading explored the use of activating prior knowledge before, during, and after reading. It was discovered that what students learned and retained previously can impact their understanding of information in course texts. Ambe concluded that activating prior knowledge should be developed and encouraged for individual, small group, and classroom instruction in order to facilitate improvement in student reading and making gains toward better reading achievement.

A second reading strategy is vocabulary development. Vocabulary instruction according to Houge, Geier, and Peyton (2008) is an important element for teaching literacy. Flanigan and Greenwood (2007) conducted a case study which focused on content area vocabulary before reading text and after reading text. A similar study by Rance-Roney (2010) supported the findings that preteaching vocabulary plays an integral role in comprehension.

A third strategy to assist students with reading difficulty is comprehension. Lapp, Fisher, and Grant (2008) conducted a qualitative case study which focused on student-centered activities, discussions, and teacher thinking aloud as interactive strategies toward acquiring comprehension knowledge. Students in the reading intervention class would have to take the state's standardized tests; therefore, acquiring reading

comprehension skills and strategies would be a necessary component to succeed in these areas. Lapp et al. (2008) concluded that in order for students to make gains in reading achievement, teachers need to use interactive strategies combined with their expertise in the field. The researchers recommended that less independent work and more interactive strategies be used on a regular basis.

A final strategy is fluency. Biancarosa and Snow's (2006) review of studies for the *Reading Next* report concluded that fluency facilitates comprehension and students who do not struggle with words can focus on the meaning of what they read. The following studies explore the effects of reading fluency on comprehension.

Rasinski et al. (2005) asserted that fluency is the most important factor to facilitate successful reading with high school students. When fluency is improved, students can make significant gains in reading comprehension. Other researchers such as Allington (2006) and Smith (2007) have made contributions for strategies to improve fluency. Smith (2007) concluded that the act of daily reading will improve students' ability to read. Allington (2006) agreed that if students are provided with texts that are appropriate for their reading level, fluency usually improves, whereby students can read independently and then make gains toward reading comprehension.

In a report from the NCES (2007), student literacy is decreasing and basic grade level performance is less than proficient. The report also revealed that the percentage of 12th grade students performing at or above the basic level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress decreased from 80% in 1992 to 73% in 2005, the last year of testing until the 2010 report. Efforts are being made at successful implementation of RTI at the

high school level, particularly for students who are at risk for academic failure. Reading intervention is the focus of this study. However, future research needs to be conducted on a larger scale because the study was limited to a small sample size.

### **Response to Intervention**

RTI is a multitiered intervention approach that is designed to provide early intervention strategies to students who are at risk for academic failure (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). This belief was supported by Bender and Shores (2007), who stated that RTI is a process that supports high-quality, scientifically based instructional practices that involve monitoring student progress and adjusting instruction based on student's response. In addition, other researchers such as Mellard and Johnson (2008) believed that RTI can be used to enhance students' achievement. Fuchs and Deshler (2007) also claimed that RTI can be used as an additional means to identify students with Learning Disabilities (LD).

RTI is governed by a set of principles. Some of these principles include adapting instruction on an as-needs basis, evaluating students' responsiveness to intervention, monitoring students' progress frequently, and providing evidence based instruction with fidelity (National Association of State Directors of Special Education [NASDSE], 2005; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). The American Association of School Administrators (AASA), Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE), National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), State Title One Directors, and Spectrum K12 School Solutions conducted a 2-year survey from March 2007 to March 2009 and found that the use of RTI models have increased from 44% in 2007 to 71% in 2009 across school districts (Spectrum K12 School Solutions, 2009). The survey also revealed that in

2008 and 2009, the use of RTI in all grade levels increased from 16% to 51%.

RTI can be distinguished from other teaching practices through data-driven and systematic activities designed to improve the outcome of students who are at risk of academic failure due to cognitive or other factors (Compton, 2003; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Gresham, 2002; President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002; Speece, Case, & Malloy, 2003). In other words, RTI is a set of scientifically-based instructional procedures designed to facilitate the academic deficits of students who are struggling academically. As noted by Fuchs and Fuchs (2006), RTI is designed to provide early, effective instruction for struggling students and to provide a valid way to assess the needs of these learners.

### **Background of Response to Intervention**

Stanley Deno, along with a team of University of Minnesota researchers have been credited for developing RTI. The initial RTI studies were conducted by Deno, Mirkin, and Bergan in 1977. This study used curriculum based measurement (CBM) as an assessment of students' reading skills and developed goals for students with reading problems based on the outcomes of the assessments (Batsche et al., 2006). Griffiths, Parson, Burns, VanDerheyden, and Tilly (2007) noted that RTI

offers the best opportunity of the past three decades to ensure that every child, no matter how gifted or challenged, will be equally valued in an education system where the progress of every child is monitored and individualized interventions with appropriate levels of intensity are provided for students as needed. (p. i)

Fuchs (2006) believed that the best strategy for identifying students who are at risk of

academic failure is to give all students an assessment screening at the beginning of the school year. Results from these assessments should be used to compare the performance of struggling students to local, state, or national levels (Fuchs, 2006).

The studies by Bergan (1977) and Deno and Mirkin (1977) varied in their RTI procedures. Bender and Shores (2007) noted that the variations in the procedures evolved into the two RTI models: the problem-solving and standard protocol approach. Bergan (1977) used the problem-solving approach to address the behavioral needs of special education students, while Deno and Mirken (1977) developed a remediation intervention plan for students with disabilities using CBM to assess students' progress over time. This method became known as the standard treatment protocol (Bender & Shores, 2007). Bergan used an intervention team to evaluate data from continuously monitoring students' progress and compared the results to their peers' grade level performance to make a determination for intervention. Thus, this team-based approach evolved into the problem-solving approach (Batsche et al., 2006). Although there are similarities between the two approaches, there are also important differences. For example, Mirkin used CBM to establish benchmarks for student achievement whereas Bergan's problem-solving approach compared students' performance to that of their peers (Kukic, Tilly, & Michelson, 2006). Regardless of the approach used, all students targeted for intervention have to go through a process to determine eligibility for intervention. Overall, a variety of methods may have to be used in order to differentiate intervention and monitor students' progress.

### **Response to Intervention Process**

The RTI process consists of a variety of methods such as assessment, intervention, and instruction to students who may be at risk for academic failure (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). This process allows school to make early identification of struggling students and implement the necessary interventions geared toward stabilizing students' grades and keep them on track with grade level placement. Through the RTI process, it is expected that student achievement would increase and the potential for failure and retention minimized.

The RTI process involves (a) screening for at-risk students, (b) monitoring of responsiveness to instruction, and (b) determining the course of action needed (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). To begin the process, a subgroup of at-risk students is selected. These students are monitored on their classroom performance and response to differentiated instruction (Batsche et al., 2005). Students who are responsive and show progress are returned to their regular classroom prior to the intervention. However, students who are determined not to be responsive to the intervention are placed in the next intervention tier. Here, the program is modified, students' progress is again monitored, placement is determined, and courses of action are implemented (Batsche et al., 2005). At this level, students' failure to respond to the intervention may lead to the diagnosis and evaluation for LD, and referral to special education. (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Fuchs et al., 2003)

Doug and Lynn Fuchs' dual discrepancy model have been used to determine whether a student should be referred to special education (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998). This

model allows teachers to examine the students' level of performance and learning rate (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Students who are not making significant progress after intensive intervention strategies are usually referred for special education evaluation. For example, Center for Exceptional Children (CEC) 2009 stated that in order for a student to be regarded as unresponsive to the intervention, the student's performance on assessments must be lower than the average scores of the class. Additionally, the student's rate of learning must be slower than his classmates. To counteract this, early intervention strategies need to be implemented for students experiencing academic difficulty before they enter a cycle of failure. According to CEC (2009), early intervention might reduce the number of students referred for special education services. Vaughn and Fuchs (2003) support the implementation of high-quality instructional intervention before a student fail, because the intervention will not only benefit students with disabilities, but will also be advantageous to all other students.

The criteria for determining who qualifies for special education services, and what the deciding factors are is done at the Tier 3 level. Results from diagnostic tests such as norm-reference and standardized tests are used to determine special education eligibility (Batsche et al., 2005). Generally, Tier 4 is reserved for students with a learning disability who have qualified for special education services. Under IDEA (2004) a student can be eligible for Specific Learning Disability (SLD) identification if the student is non-responsive to intervention strategies in either a 3 or 4-Tier model. However, some students who receive these supports might not require an IEP or special education services (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003).

### **Response to Intervention Large Scale Models**

Several large scale RTI models have been implemented in states outside of Georgia. They include:

1. Pennsylvania's Instructional Support Teams (IST)
2. Iowa's Heartland Area Education Agency (AEA)
3. Ohio's Intervention Based Assessment (IBA)

4. Minneapolis Public School's Problem-Solving Model (PSM) (Burns et al., 2005; Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005). Burns et al. (2005) noted that regardless of the RTI model considered, each generally involves a close monitoring of students' progress, group problem solving, implementation of research-based interventions for individual students and consideration for special education services only after a student fails to respond to the intervention practices in a timely manner. This belief was supported by Hollenbeck (2007) who stated that the ideal RTI model consists of ongoing progress monitoring, tracking of data, using research-based practices, having an effective general education instruction, and providing specific interventions for at-risk students. Having knowledge of these four models is important for the school in making decisions for what will work in the best interest of at-risk students seeking remediation in reading. The following describes these four models.

#### **Pennsylvania's Instructional Support Team (IST)**

In 1990, Pennsylvania introduced IST as a pre-referral and collaborative problem-solving intervention model where special education students receive instruction in the general education classroom (Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; Fuchs et al., 2003). To facilitate



this as a collaborative effort, special education teachers received formal training to help regular education teachers implement the intervention (Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; Fuchs et al., 2003). For example, if a student is experiencing difficulty, the student is assessed and then an intervention plan is designed for the student based on the assessment data (Fuchs et al., 2003). The IST model was implemented in all the Pennsylvania school districts over a five year period (Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005).

### **Iowa's Heartland Area Education Agency (AEA)**

The Heartland Agency Model is a three-tier model that originally started with four tiers. It was implemented in 1985 to identify students with academic difficulties in the classroom ((Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005). The Heartland model gave teachers several opportunities and support geared toward moving students in the right direction of responding to instruction (Fuchs et al., 2003). Since the implementation of the Heartland model, Tilly (2003) noted that the number of students placed in special education has been reduced.

### **Ohio's Intervention Based Assessment (IBA)**

IBA is a data-driven evaluative program that uses data to design and evaluate various interventions to determine who may be the recipients of special education services. (Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; Fuchs et al., 2003) It was implemented in Ohio during the 1992-1993 school year (Fuchs et al., 2003). Results from a study conducted by McNamara and Hollinger (2003) claimed that the use of IBA decreased the number of students eligible for special education and increased the number of students eligible for intervention.

### **Minneapolis Problem Solving Model (PSM)**

Minneapolis Public School developed PSM in 1993 as a means to identify students for services in special education using three steps (Fuchs et al., 2003; Marston, Muyskens, Lau, & Canter, 2003). First, intervention is carried out in the classroom where students are screened in step one. Next, students who are identified receive intervention and progress monitoring from the intervention team in step two. Last, students who are not responding to step two interventions are placed in step three based on referrals from special education teachers for placement in special education classes (Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; Marston et al., 2003). In all, large scale models have made strides toward students' learning.

Burns and Ysseldyke (2005), noted that the four large scale models, “demonstrated large effects for improving student learning and systemic variables such as reducing the number of children referred to and placed into special education” (p. 10). Burns et al. (2005) examined a meta-analytic review of the large scale RTI implementation models including the four field-based models and other research-based models. The results indicated that there was compelling evidence for the effectiveness of the large scale models. In particular, both research based and field RTI models had compelling outcomes, yet field based RTI models, including AEA, IBA, IST, and PSM, consistently had stronger effects than research based RTI models. The authors believed that this may be due to the interventions being put into practice, and being implemented for a longer duration. On the other hand, Fuchs et al. (2003) suggest the studies conducted on the four large scale models consisted of small sample and there needs to be

more studies on large scale implementation to conclude that RTI models are significantly effective. (Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005). Despite the conclusion, the common factor among the four large scale models is student improvement. The next step in the RTI process is determining whether the problem-solving or standard treatment approach is best suited for the model used.

### **Problem-Solving Versus Standard Treatment Approach to RTI**

The two approaches that are commonly used for RTI are the problem-solving approach and the standard treatment response, which is also called the standard protocol model (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Both approaches utilize universal screening, early intervention, multiple tiers, and student progress monitoring to make informed decisions (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). The problem-solving approach or method is generally used by practitioners, while the standard treatment response method is mostly used by researchers in research studies. The main difference between the two approaches lies in how instructional decisions and placements are made, and in how the number of interventions is used with individual students (Bender & Shores, 2007). The similarities between the both approaches are the three or four tiers used based on the intensity of the intervention (Bender & Shores, 2007). In the problem-solving approach, the focus is on collaborative team decision making. Here, the team presents a variety of interventions to respond to students' needs. In the standard treatment protocol however, the focus is on providing a specific research based intervention for students with similar difficulties. This is done by using a standardized format to ensure that the implementation is carried out with fidelity (Shores & Chester, 2008).

The problem-solving approach is distinguishable from the standard treatment response method in that students receive one on one instruction within the classroom. Fuchs et al. (2003) claimed that the individualized nature of the approach is based on the belief that students' characteristics cannot predict the success of an intervention, and no single intervention will work successfully for all students. Canter (2004) defined the problem-solving model as a systemic approach which evaluates the students' strengths and weaknesses. In addition, it also evaluates the effectiveness of the instruction the students receives. The problem-solving approach has different versions that vary in the number of intervention tiers used. However, the common thread between the problem-solving and standard treatment method is the 4-step process aligned to each intervention tier.

The 4-step process includes (1) identifying the problem, (2) analyzing the problem and selecting the intervention, (3) implementing the intervention, and (4) monitoring the response to intervention (Fuchs et al., 2003). The people involved in the process may include school psychologists, educators, and parents (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

Generally, the problem-solving model is typically preferred by practitioners and educators (Bender & Shores, 2007). However, criticism of the model stem from the lack of empirical research and valid data governing the implementation and outcomes of the intervention (Bender & Shores, 2007). Conversely, in rare instances where research was completed, the studies did not provide evidence that was persuasive enough to show that proper protocol was carried out, and that the implementation of classroom intervention showed improvement in student achievement and behavior (Fuchs et al., 2003).

The standard treatment protocol is an alternative to problem solving. The subtleties between the two approaches are that the problem-solving approach differs from individual to individual, whereas the standard treatment protocol does not (Bender & Shores, 2007). Hollenbeck (2007) asserted that some researchers are considering merging the problem-solving and standard protocol models. Vaughn and Fuchs (2003) RTI model emphasized problem-solving in the beginning tiers, high accountability standards, and standard interventions to deal with students' specific learning problems.

Implementation of the approaches usually involves a trial of fixed duration such as 12 to 18 weeks, delivered in small groups, or taught individually (Al Otaiba & Fuchs, 2006; McMaster et al., 2006; Vaughn et al., 2003; Vellutino et al., 1996). If students respond to the remediation and have made significant gains, they are returned to the classroom for instruction. If they are unresponsive, they move to a more intensive tier. If they then demonstrate adequate progress, they are returned to the general education classroom. However, if insufficient progress is made, further evaluation is warranted because a disability may be suspected. Because the standard treatment approach consists of only two tiers, it is considered more straightforward to implement and thus deemed more practical (Fuchs et al., 2003). The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2010) constructed a list of things that must be in place if a secondary school wants to have a successful RTI service delivery model. These include scientifically based instruction that shows increase as the tiers progress, evaluating students' progress to determine failure or success, frequent monitoring of tiers through data, making adjustments to instruction to accommodate students' needs, and maintaining

fidelity throughout the process. The following described the tier structure in the problem-solving and standard treatment models.

### **RTI Tiers**

The problem-solving and standard protocol models are divided into three tiers or four tiers and are usually a triangle-shaped design where Tier 1 is at the base of the triangle, Tier 2 is in the middle, and both Tiers 3 and 4 are at the top of the triangle (Wright, 2007). In Tier 1, high quality instructional and behavioral support is given to students who are experiencing difficulty in the general education setting. Universal screening and benchmark assessments informally identify these students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Wagner et al. (2006) claimed that intervention should occur three times weekly for 30 minutes in small groups no larger than five students. Students who are not making adequate progress will be referred to Tier 2 interventions.

In Tier 2, students receive more specialized instructional support which can be implemented by the general education teacher or support staff who has been trained on the selected intervention (Wright, 2007). At this stage of intervention, students receive instruction in small group settings with the focus on their targeted areas of difficulty. For instance, students who struggle with reading will receive small group instruction focusing on their area of difficulty. During the period where intervention is implemented, students' progress is monitored to determine the effectiveness of teacher instruction and the integrity in which it is carried out intervention (Hale, 2008; Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Based on the progress monitoring outcomes, three steps can be taken:

1. Students may return to the regular, large, classroom setting if their performance

level is on par with their grade level peers.

2. Students may remain in Tier 2 if their performance level is still below their grade level peers but are making progress toward their stated goal.

3. Students may move to Tier 3 if they are not responding to the intervention (Hale, 2008; Mellard & Johnson, 2008).

The concept of Tier 3 continues to be debated between researchers and educators. It is not always clear as to where it should be implemented (Bender & Shores, 2007). Batsche et al. (2006) noted that special education teachers should be the ones to implement Tier 3 instruction in the special education classrooms. These researchers feel that Tier 3 is a very intensive process and instruction should be delivered in the special education classroom by special education teachers. It is the belief of The National Joint Commission on Learning Disabilities (2005) that a comprehensive evaluation should be given to students to determine eligibility for special education and should be administered by a team that is versed in many disciplines. However, the predominant notion behind RTI is to start the intervention process early when the child's academic progress shows that there is a need, rather than delay the implementation of the intervention due to eligibility guidelines and special education testing (Batsche et al., 2006; Machek & Nelson, 2007). In order for RTI to be successful at the school level, several stakeholders such as principals, teachers, other professionals, and parents' participation in the implementation and process are important. The following will describe the roles of these stakeholders in RTI at the school level.

### **The School's Role in RTI**

Schools have the responsibility to employ evidence based research intervention strategies that is scientifically validated in order to afford students the best opportunities to be successful (Wright, 2007). Under NCLB Act of 2001 and IDEA reauthorization of 2004, schools are required to adhere to research based and evidence-based intervention practices (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005). Therefore, access to research-based interventions should be available for schools that are implementing RTI.

In order for RTI to work effectively, attention needs to be given to areas such as progress monitoring, research-based instruction, and the RTI process (CEC 2009). Generally, staff may benefit from professional development in these areas. Blankenstein (2004) asserted that the factor which distinguishes intervention strategies from remediation strategies is the timely manner that problems are identified. Furthermore, schools need to have training on intervention strategies that have worked (Blankenstein, 2004). For instance, if a strategy worked well in one school resulting in the desired outcomes, then those strategies could be shared amongst schools through networking. Moreover, schools may provide staff with training manuals, and may also bring in university personnel to assist teachers with the curriculum (CEC, 2009). Finally, Blankenstein stated that “schools that are committed to success for all students systematically identify struggling students...identify problems as early as possible-well before students have a chance to fail” (Blankenstein, 2004, p.113). It is usually up to the stakeholders to collaborate and use their resources to facilitate students’ success in RTI.



## **Stakeholders' Roles in RTI**

### **The Principal's Role**

School principals play an important role in implementing RTI. According to CEC (2009), school leadership is the additional ingredient required for implementing RTI because strong collaborative leadership helps schools develop a strong core program. Shores and Chester (2008) noted that principals have the greatest potential impact on the success or failure of RTI. Vaughn and Roberts (2007) asserted that effective leadership is an essential factor in the implementation process of RTI. According to Bender and Shores (2007), leaders have the ability to empower teachers to use intervention strategies that work best for at-risk students. Moreover, Burns and Ysseldyke (2005) claimed that modeling RTI procedures and decision-making is the principal's role.

Principals are required to be knowledgeable about RTI's process, philosophy, and policies. These include research-based intervention strategies and instruction, computer-based model (CBM) assessments, progress-monitoring, and data-driven decision making for RTI eligibility (Hardcastle & Justice, 2006). Other tasks may include selecting the right staff for the program, motivating the staff, making professional development available to staff, and evaluating the effectiveness of RTI (Bender & Shores, 2007). Overall, regular education and special education teachers, faculty, professionals, and administrators may have a common understanding of how the school, district, state, and national goals are addressed through the RTI model and the principal's vision for the program.

### **The Teacher's Role**

Both general and special education teachers play an integral role in the RTI process. For example, in most cases, general education teachers are responsible for providing effective, research-based instruction to all students at the Tier 1 level (Bender & Shores, 2007), whereas, at the Tier 2 level, special education teachers and other specialized staff collaborate in designing interventions that may be by the special education teacher. Fuchs et al (2003) encourages the team to use multiple sources of data. Additionally, special education teachers become more involved at the Tier 3 and Tier 4 levels of RTI where students who are not responding to the intervention are referred for special education consideration. Both general education and special education teachers are involved in instruction and monitoring at specific levels of Tiers of intervention (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005) and are expected to have active, collaborative roles in the RTI process (Batsche et al., 2005).

At the high school level, teachers face the challenging task of improving students' achievement in academic content despite their learning background. For students who are struggling with reading, intervention is vital to their success. If students are able to read with purpose and understand what they are reading, academic achievement may increase (Burns, 2001; Ivey, 1999; Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Solar, 2002; Richardson & Morgan, 1994). Burns et al. (2001) noted that it is necessary for teachers to recognize their students' reading difficulties, utilize pedagogical practices that reinforce comprehension skills, and foster critical thinking and independent thought in their

students. Hence, teachers can provide at-risk readers with learning opportunities that addresses reading deficiencies.

### **Other Professionals' Role**

According to the American Speech Language Hearing Association (ASLHA 2006) and Jimerson (2005), professionals who can make a difference and contribute to students' success if they work together are the school principal, administrators, general and special education teachers, reading specialists, speech-language pathologists, school psychologist, counselors, social worker, and parents. ASLHA (2006) claimed that if professionals could collaborate and contribute their skills and knowledge in an innovative way as a team, they would definitely be working together in the best interest of the children. Furthermore, professionals can provide differentiated instruction to struggling students in both the general and special education classrooms, and decide what changes should be made to the students' instruction (Burns & Coolong-Chaffin, 2006; DLD, 2006; IDA, 2006).

Principals, administrators, general and special education teachers, and psychologists must redefine their roles and importance when collaborating with student assessments, when monitoring interventions, and when developing the RTI system (Batsche et al.; Kavale & Kovalski, 2006; National Association of State Directors of Special Education 2007). The National Education Association (NEA) believes that general education teachers possess a vital role in providing essential instruction to students who may be struggling academically (2006). As states, schools, and districts formulate and effectuate RTI, educators will be afforded the opportunity to be a part of

the team that supports and responds to students' academic and behavioral needs with more attention and concentration on early intervention (IRA, 2007; NEA, 2006).

There will be a much greater need for school psychologists' training in consultation and counseling to make the process successful as schools and districts implement new RTI procedures (NASP, 2006; SSWAA, 2006). Also, Kratochwill, Clements, and Kalymon (2007) claimed that schools who are adopting RTI should make professional development available to the staff because of the importance of the program's success. Additionally, RTI requires time for the team to meet and collaborate which would necessitate common planning time (Hall, 2008). Finally, Canter et al. (2008) noted that not only are the support of school administration and teaching staff fundamental to the success of the RTI model, but also parental involvement and support in the initial process through the assessment process of RTI is vital to its success.

### **The Parent's Role**

Researchers have demonstrated that parenting style and parent-child relationship will contribute to a child's academic success (Hayes, 2005; James, 2008; Payne, 2005; Smith-Hill, 2007). Research studies also have confirmed that parental involvement makes a positive impact in enhancing students' graduation success rate (Curry, 2007; Difnam, 2007; Sims, 2008). Additionally, parental guidance is likely to promote adolescent school success when it occurs in the context of an authoritative home environment (Hickman & Crossland, 2004; Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992). The practicing educators have recommended parental involvement to be one of the effective strategies to improve student's academic success on the graduation test.

Parents and families must become involved in the planning and implementation stages of the RTI process. Parents need to sit in on a face to face meeting with the RTI team where the process is explained in detail. If they consent, a detailed report about the intervention plans should be given to them in writing. Furthermore, parents should receive feedback on their child's progress at each tier level. This can be done through a phone call, written report, or meeting. Finally, if students are not progressing after intense intervention, parents can request a formal evaluation to determine eligibility for special education service anytime during the RTI process (CEC, 2009).

### **Concerns About RTI**

While research on RTI at the elementary level continues to grow, research at the secondary (middle and high) level is limited (Samuels, 2009). Burns and Gibbons (2008) agreed that RTI implementation has been more focused on the elementary level, and less at the secondary level. Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) also concurred that a growing body of research in RTI conceptualization and implementation has made progress over time, but the elementary level has been the primary focus of most research. Vaughn and Fuchs (2003) also agreed that interventions for elementary grades have been studied more while middle and high schools interventions have received less attention.

Duffy (2007) noted that there has been some discussion regarding high school students' response to intervention and other researchers such as Johnson and Smith (2008) and Torgensen (2003) agree that discussions about RTI implementation with older students are taking place. Duffy (2007) also noted that few high schools have found successful methods of effective and appropriate implementation of intervention for

struggling high school students and that high school students are rarely diagnosed with learning disabilities at that level. Gresham (2001) and Kovalesski (2003) claimed that researchers have not established a consensus on the length of time a student should be on an intervention plan before that plan is evaluated, and the number of plans that should be attempted before the student who is not responding to the intervention be referred to special education. Sansosti, Noltmeyer, and Goss (2010) stated that other concerns about RTI include few evidence-based interventions for secondary school students, and a lack of systemic data collection systems. Tilley (2008) concurred that it is a challenge is to maintain focus on long term student learning goals while paying attention to logistical issues such as common planning among teachers, scheduling, and the implementation of all aspects that allow students to continue on positive learning paths. Another concern is from administrators. They express concern about teacher preparedness, the lack of guidelines for implementing RTI, and the lack of research based interventions for secondary students (Wiener & Soodak, 2008).

The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) (2005) suggested that further study is needed on RTI to improve academic outcomes for all students including students with learning disabilities (NJCLD, 2005). This belief was supported by Jimerson, Burns and VanDer Heyden (2007), who stated that there is considerable promise for RTI and that more research is also needed on various aspects of the program. Lujan (2008) asserted that an important factor of RTI research is fidelity of implementation where screening and monitoring students' progress should be done with integrity. Moreover, communication amongst schools, districts, and states needs to be

cohesive in order to have an impact on the development and implementation of large scale RTI models (VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Barnett, 2005).

Research on younger students with reading difficulties suggest that early intervention is necessary, because as students get older, it is more difficult to remediate the problems associated with reading (Torgesen et al., 2006). Additionally, when older students are falling behind academically, the amount of intervention needed for them to perform on grade level with their peers will be more extensive, given both the complexity of the information that older students are expected to know, and the longer period of time that some of these students have struggled with reading. Torgesen et al., (2003) suggest that students who are struggling with reading because of inadequate classroom instruction may respond well to intervention. However, Duffy (2007) noted that few high schools have found successful ways to effectively implement interventions that provide appropriate academic supports to struggling students.

### **Literature Related to the Methods**

Response to Intervention is grounded in a philosophy of improving student achievement by providing data-based, supplemental instruction to students who are not successful in the core curriculum. Several researchers and practitioners have noted that the most important aspect of improved achievement is student engagement and reading motivation (Booth, 2006; Lesesne, 2006; Pitcher et al., 2007; Reeve, Jang, Carrell, Jeon, & Barch, 2004; Tovani, 2004; Wilson, 1999). Meltzer (2001) noted that students who struggle with reading are reluctant to keep on trying to read. According to the reading intervention instructor, students in the reading intervention class shy away from reading

in front of their peers even though most of them have similar reading challenges. This was supported by O'Brien, Steward, and Beach (2009) who asserted that struggling readers refrain from reading because they do not read at grade level, especially in comparison to their peers' proficiency. Additionally, other researchers such as Greenleaf and Hinchman (2009) and Vacca (2006) contended that students who have confidence in their reading ability have a better chance of understanding the content from what they are reading. The authors in these studies looked at students' reading deficits and applied various intervention strategies to help students who struggle with reading comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary development. Based on these research strategies and findings, the researcher will seek to find answers to the reading problems of at-risk students at the research site.

For this research, interviews and artifacts will be the best methods to collect data on at-risk students reading in high school to answer the research questions. As noted in Finn and Kohler (2010), interviews allow a participant to discuss a topic in detail. With interviews, the researcher will be able to make meaning out of the participants' responses to the interview questions relating to the study's topic. According to Yin (2009), interview is one of the most important sources of case study information. In this study, the principal method of data collection will be interviews because, according to Creswell (2003), interviews bring out participants' views and opinions in a controlled environment. The data from the interviews were used to discover themes and generalizations that were made about RTI and reading intervention.



### **Literature Related to the Use of Differing Methodologies**

The use of differing methodologies to investigate the outcomes of improving student achievement in reading through RTI is based on practicing differentiated instruction such as small-group classroom instruction, based on the constructivist theory of learning. This is supported by Painter and Painter (2008) who asserts that teaching from a constructivist perspective results in more effective instruction which results in greater achievement outcomes for students. In an RTI framework, there are key components that must be provided. One such component is to match student's needs with high-quality intervention and instruction in order to gain the best outcomes for student learning (Reutebuch, 2008). Students in the intervention class were provided with instruction to match their individual needs in the form of small group or individualized instruction. This is supported by Gordon (2009) who noted that a small-group differentiated instruction is an example of teaching practices that require students to become active participants in their learning, thus resulting in successful outcomes of student learning. The case studies in this section support background knowledge, vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension as effective strategies for teachers to use with students who have reading difficulties. Students in the reading intervention class exhibited one or more of these challenges. These studies have shown the benefits of using differing strategies to attain positive outcomes based on the student's area of deficit; therefore, they make a case for the use of a qualitative case study to investigate the use of RTI to help students with reading difficulties succeed in the reading

intervention class.

### **Summary**

The literature presented in this section was based on the problem statement and research questions of this study. This qualitative case study explored the use of the RTI delivery model in a high school environment. This form of research was chosen because it allowed for understanding the RTI process and how the RTI model was implemented at the high school level, and the degree to which the implementation of a reading program was effective. Additionally, a qualitative design was best suited for this study because of the small sample size. The researcher used interviews and documentation of students' work as they related to RTI and reading intervention for this study.

RTI is a multi-tiered intervention approach that is implemented by schools to meet the needs of all students including special education students (Burns et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Fuchs et al., 2003; Mellard et al., 2004). RTI uses early intervention instructional strategies before students have the opportunity to fail (Blankenstein, 2004). RTI is a process that is implemented and facilitated through the use of multi-tiered models. Fletcher et al. (2007) noted that RTI is not a single model, but a process through which intervention is derived. In addition, RTI's methods of implementation vary, yet the ideal RTI model entails continuous progress monitoring, tracking data, utilizing research-based practices, providing specific interventions for at risk students, and maintaining effective instruction in the general education setting (Hollenbeck, 2007). According to Al Otaiba and Fuchs (2006), students who participate in a tiered intervention for a specific period are more likely to experience an increase in

their learning outcomes. Bender (2008) stated that when teachers closely monitor struggling students' progress, both student and teacher can focus on the specific areas that are challenging to the student and instruction can be differentiated to meet the student's need.

The key factors for successful continuation of RTI at the research site are based on the roles of the principal, teachers, professionals, students, and parents. As the literature noted, they all play an integral role in contributing to the success of the program. Moreover, it is the goal of the school to ensure students are proficient in academic content areas; in particular students who lack proficiency in basic reading skills. According to Borasi and Siegel (2000), high school curricula are designed with the premise that students should already possess the reading skills to understand the concepts of content literature. However, not all students possess the knowledge base in content literacy. For some high school students, reading across the curriculum may be challenging because of content difficulty. Biancarosa and Snow (2006) noted that difficult text reading is a challenge to some high school students as well as greater learning expectations in content knowledge (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Brozo & Simpson, 2007). Using RTI as an intervention measure for struggling readers in the current school year is a goal at the research site. Success in this area will impact standardized test results as the school strive toward maintaining AYP. Results from this research should benefit the school in identifying areas for improvement in high school RTI reading intervention for at-risk student.

### Section 3: Research Method

#### **Introduction**

This qualitative research study examined how RTI was used to address reading difficulties of at-risk readers at a high school in a southern state. I discussed the research methods, sample and setting, consent, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, and validity in this section. The local problem that existed at the research setting was that at-risk students participating in a reading intervention class were reading below grade level. This was evident from the term grade posting for November 2011, which indicated a high failure rate in all content areas. Students who struggled with reading may have had difficulty understanding coursework in more than one subject area.

The purpose of this study was to examine whether or not there was improvement in reading after some high school students participated in a reading intervention class. Since the current reading class had not been effective in improving students with reading difficulties academic performance, a case study was necessary to answer the research questions as to the “how” and “why” this was so. This study provided an in-depth description of RTI and the role of stakeholders who provide it. Margolin and Buchler (2004) defined scientifically-based research as research that provides evidence of a particular instructional method that works in an educational setting. Results from this study could help guide future research on the use of RTI reading intervention at the high school level. This section described the design, sample, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analyses process, and validity for the study.

### **Selection of Qualitative Research Design**

When deciding upon the research design that was best suited for a study, three designs were considered: the mixed method and quantitative and qualitative approaches (Creswell 2003). A qualitative design was chosen because qualitative research was best for detailed and systematic analysis which in the long run provided valuable explanations of the processes that were occurring (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Creswell (2003) affirmed that qualitative research is interpretive and applies simultaneous, interactive, and multifaceted complex reasoning. This complex reasoning was developed throughout the phases of data collection and analysis as emerging themes were discovered. Park and Lee (2010) noted that in qualitative research, data are interpreted through the literature review, triangulation, and member checking, which gives credibility to the research. Additionally, qualitative research methods provide rich contextual pictures and in-depth descriptions that allow a deeper understanding of how participants perceive a phenomenon (Finn & Kohler, 2010). Qualitative research was more appropriate because the study design continued to evolve throughout the data collection phase as opposed to a deductive sequence of steps that preceded data collection. The specific qualitative methodology for this research was an instrumental case study.

### **Selection of Case Study Tradition**

Creswell (2007) noted that there are several research traditions. Some methods of gathering data are through biography, ethnography, phenomenology, and case study. The biography method uses narration to focus on theories, processes, and the authentic and general features of a person's life. Ethnography describes cultural and social changes

within a cultural group. Phenomenology examines phenomenal experiences and uses tables, figures of statement to derive meaning (Creswell, 2007).

Yin (1994) defined case study as “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). Merriam (1998) agreed that factors characteristic of the phenomenon can be uncovered during case studies in qualitative research. In other words, a case study focuses on a specific event, program, situation, or phenomenon, expresses rich details, and highlights the phenomenon (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). For these reasons, the specificity of focus made it a good design for difficult questions, occurrences, or situations that arose from daily practice. Additionally, case studies are used to answer questions about the change and process of a phenomenon within a specific context that need explanations such as “how” or “why.” Yin (2003) provided a strong argument for the use of case studies as a comprehensive research strategy to guide the logic of a study, the data collection of the study, as well as the data analysis procedures.

There are three types of case studies. They are instrumental, collective, and intrinsic case studies (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 2003). Instrumental case studies are used when the focus of the study is on a particular concern or issue and within a bounded system or setting. Collective case studies focus on multiple studies to highlight and show various perspectives of the issue being studied. Intrinsic case studies focus on a unique or unusual situation that is presented in the case whereby the researcher wants to have a better understanding of the case for intrinsic purposes (Stake, 2005).

Based on Stake's (2005) description of qualitative case studies, an instrumental case study is best suited for the purpose of this study. This was a within-site study bounded to one school using a small population size. The effectiveness of RTI within a reading intervention class to improve at-risk students' reading in a particular time frame was examined. The reading class was the case being studied.

The research designs that were considered and rejected for this study were the mixed method and quantitative approach. The reasons were that in a mixed method approach, the investigator collects data in a sequential or simultaneous format through quantitative survey and qualitative open-ended interviews (Creswell 2003). Surveys were not used in the study. In a quantitative approach, mathematical data are collected from surveys or experiments using instruments that yield statistical data. Accordingly, Muijs (2006) noted that quantitative methods are used to provide answers to a phenomenon or specific questions by using mathematical data. This study did not employ the use of statistical data; therefore, a quantitative approach was not applicable. A qualitative tradition was more appropriate because qualitative studies were best for detailed and systematic analysis, which in the long run provided valuable explanations of the processes that occurred (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Information gathered from interviews, de-identified students' work samples, and school documents were the sources used for inquiry and determined the results of the questions researched.

### **Research Questions**

This qualitative case study aimed to examine the effectiveness of using RTI model in a reading intervention program for high school at-risk readers. According to

Hiebert and Taylor (1994), many students who are identified as at risk of failing reading participate in some kind of reading intervention program where the intervention specialist or teacher targets the identified areas of weakness. This study focused on addressing the following overarching research question: In what ways is the high school reading class effective in improving at-risk students' reading, and how could the program be improved?

Additionally, the following subquestions were addressed:

1. How do teachers teaching the reading class conceptualize RTI?
2. How does the RTI team conceptualize the reading class?
3. What have been the benefits and challenges of the reading class?

### **Context of the Study**

The setting for this study was one high school located within a school district in a southern state. The student population was 1,298, and the demographic makeup was 60% Black, 33% White, 4% Hispanic, 3% Multi Racial, and 1% Asian (GADOE, 2009). The school's enrollment has relatively been consistent for the past 3 years. RTI was implemented at the site for at least 4 consecutive school years; however, 2011-2012 was the first year a specific class was created for RTI to teach reading. For 3 consecutive years, the school did not meet AYP; however, the school met the state's entire criteria for AYP for the 2012-2013 school year. Thus, the school had to maintain AYP status and had placed more focus on RTI. For the 2011-2012 school year, students who were at-risk of academic failure based on term grade reports were referred to the RTI team. Out of these referrals, 15 students were enrolled in the reading intervention class. This was the



population sample used for documentation purposes. It was these students' class work and grade reports that were used as documentation. These students were not participants in the research; however, de-identified work samples from their first semester class work and grade reports were used as data for the study.

The RTI program used was a tiered framework designed to identify and assist struggling students (GADOE, 2009) and aimed to resolve students' reading difficulties through a multitiered instruction model (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Intervention at the Tier 2 level was used from the three instructional tiers in the RTI model. In the models, Tier 1 provided instructional and behavioral support for students who were experiencing difficulty in the general education setting. Tier 2 provided more specialized instructional support where teams can vary or customize the instruction based on student need. Tier 3 provided a comprehensive student evaluation on those experiencing significant academic difficulties and was also used to determine eligibility for special education services (National Joint Commission on Learning Disabilities, 2005). Hiebert and Taylor (1994) noted that two options were derived from research: Students either master established reading goals or the intervention stops because of lack of progress. If the latter occurred, other reading treatments were considered. The qualitative method included collecting data from term reports to determine the progress of at-risk students with reading difficulties referred for intervention through the RTI model.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I obtained a letter of approval from the school district to perform research in the county (Appendix A). The research was subject to review by the school district Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB procedure for conducting research was for me to submit via email the research methodology, informed consent of participants, survey instruments, questionnaires, and a statement noting approval from the principal to conduct research on the school campus. The district approved the study, and evidence of approval is found in Appendix A. The invited participants in this study were two administrators, one graduation coach, and four teachers. The participants were asked to sign a consent form to participate in the research study (Appendix D and E). Ethical protection of participants was carried out by adhering to the NIH policies and procedures for protecting human research participants.

Attention to the aforementioned ethical considerations was maintained throughout the duration of the study. Because the data collection consisted of interviews, students' work samples, and school documents, confidentiality and was maintained to protect participants' identity and students' privacy. Confidentiality was maintained through the use of pseudonyms of the administrators, graduation coach, and teachers. The reading teacher did not identify students' names on their work samples. The teacher deleted students' names and personal information from grade reports and class work.

### **Procedure for Gaining Access to Participants**

I had access to the participants because the study was conducted within-site. I ensured that the study did not interfere with instructional time to a detriment of student learning by meeting with the teachers after school in their classroom, based upon the agreed convenient time of both parties. The procedures for gaining access to the participants involved meeting with them one-on-one after school to describe the research study. They were told why they were invited to participate and the significance of their role as well as their possible contribution to the study. They were informed that their participation was totally voluntary, and that they had the right to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Next, the participants who consented to be a part of the research notified me in person of a date and time to conduct a phone interview. The phone interview consisted of semistructured open-ended questions and lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Finally, I obtained approval for the study from the Institutional Review Board through Walden University.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I am a teacher at the site where the research was conducted. I worked in the capacity of the school's Career and Technical Instruction Coordinator, special education teacher, and collaborative teacher in the general education setting. I saw the long term effects of students who struggled with reading difficulties from ninth through 12<sup>th</sup> grade in both the special education and general education settings. Many of these students struggle in all core content areas because they are unable to understand challenging texts

to derive meaning from what was read, and some of these students may read words but not understand the context of the material. From these experiences, I had a voice in the RTI / SST meetings, and have been an advocate for a reading program to assist these students. My role was to conduct the research with fidelity and without bias to the study since I did not deliver reading intervention to the students whose papers were examined as data collection.

### **Researcher-Participant Working Relationship**

I have been employed at the research site for 12 years and have a good working relationship with the participants of the study. The participants represented a cross-section of the curriculum where reading for understanding is essential for students' success toward advancement to the next grade level. Additionally, the participants were part of the RTI team that monitors students' progress from 9-week progress reports. During several SST and RTI meetings, there was much concern about the direction the school wanted to taking with the reading program, and the improvement and continuation of the class. The participants were chosen because they are interested in the findings of the study in order to make changes to the program for successful continuation in the 2012-2013 or 2013-2014 school years.

### **Researcher's Bias**

I had prior involvement with RTI as a core team member. Additionally, I am currently an RTI focus group member at the Tier 4 level of intervention. Part of my role is to support and mentor students at the Tier 2 level of RTI. Maxwell (2005) noted that qualitative research is concerned about how a researcher's values and expectations may

influence how the study is conducted along with the outcome of the study. This is supported by Richards (2005) who recommended that researchers acknowledge their preconceptions, and approach the research with an open mind. Because I am familiar with RTI at the site, it is important to note that the research questions were relevant to my involvement in RTI which may be a potential bias. My bias and experiences may be related to the research study because I may want positive outcomes for the continuation of the program. The participants are also familiar with me and may be inclined to be bias with their answers to the interview questions because they may want me to succeed.

### **Criteria for Selecting Participants**

The criteria for selecting participants for this study were based on their level of involvement with RTI. The justification for selecting seven participants was for the purpose of yielding detailed information from a cross-section of educators involved in the RTI process. A selection from school leaders, RTI team members, and teachers were used in order to maximize what could be learned about the research study. The participants were selected for the interviews because they each had fulfilled a role in RTI at the school campus, and four of them had contributed to the school-wide RTI implementation. The purpose of interviewing these RTI team members was to determine their individual thoughts regarding the RTI reading class at the research site.

### **Purposeful Sampling**

The sample for this study was drawn from the population of one high school located within a school district in a southern state. According to Creswell (2007), purposeful sampling is relevant to individuals and sites because they can purposefully

communicate knowledge of the research problem and the main phenomenon in the study (p.125). Creswell (1998) is supportive of the use of small sample size and noted that the inquiry will be deeper based on the sample size, especially with fewer participants.

Purposeful sampling, according to Gay and Airasian (2000) involves selecting participants who can furnish specific, detailed information that would be enriching to the study. Qualitative researchers seek to uncover rich descriptions about the population, thus small sample sizes with few participants are preferred. Purposeful sampling for this study was used based on the belief that the participants would be a representation of the population of educators who participate in the RTI decision making process. There were no student participants for this study.

Seven participants were purposefully selected to participate in the study. The participants were two administrators, one graduation coach, and four teachers. These participants have close proximity to the reading class and are familiar with RTI. For example, the curriculum and instruction administrator is responsible for implementing the class and choosing the teacher for the class. Since this class was in its first year of implementation, the administrator was interested in the results of its success. The other teachers interact with the deidentified students in their classes and were able to determine if there was improvement in text reading for comprehension across the curriculum. The graduation coach has access to deidentified students' reports and works with the SST teacher as team leaders on student recommendation for the reading class through the RTI process.

The participants teaching experience ranged from three to 25 years of experience

in education. These individuals hold a variety of certificates and endorsements such as leadership, reading specialist, advance placement, gifted, general, and special education certificates. Degrees range from Bachelors, Masters, Education Specialist, and Doctorate.

### **Data Collection**

Creswell (2008) noted that collecting data for case studies require drawing from informational sources such as documents and interviews. Documents for this study were de-identified students' work samples, RTI reports, and the school's RTI policy statements. Yin (2003) stated that data can be collected from physical artifacts, archival records, documents, interviews, participant observations, and direct observation. Creswell (2003) suggested that researchers should incorporate methods of triangulation from various sources to support and justify emerging themes derived during the study.

For the purpose of this research study, sources of data collection were interviews, artifacts such as class work samples, and documents such as RTI reports and school emails on RTI. These provided a frame of reference affiliated with RTI and intervention practices in the reading class. Interviews were the primary sources of data. I choose interviews because they are a major part of qualitative research. Janesick (2004) noted that interviewing is communicating, exchanging information, and receiving feedback on questions pertinent to the research.

### **Semistructured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were an integral part of the data collection. Yin (2009) stated that applying this method of data collection will enable the researcher to gain valuable insights into matters or phenomenon, and also help to pinpoint pertinent sources of evidence. Yin also pointed out that interviews are designed to hone in on the topic of the case being studied to give an explanation from perceptions and inferences. Creswell (2008) asserted that this source of information provides knowledge that is not accessible through other means, such as personal experience. Semi-structured interviews were the primary source of information because I was able to make meaning out of the data. Additionally, Finn and Kohler (2010) asserted that interviews allow participants to discuss a topic in detail and Yin (2009) noted that interview is one of the most important sources of information. The data from the interviews were used to make generalizations and explore themes about RTI and the reading intervention program.

Participants for this study were interviewed individually. Interviews were conducted for approximately 45 to 60 minutes over the phone after school on a day and time that was convenient for the teacher since some teachers had other obligations. Interview questions were adapted for different types of participants. For instance, the administrator's questions were different from the teachers' questions. These are included in appendix F and G. Participants answered the interview questions and offered suggestions for strategic methods for intercepting potential at-risk students with reading difficulties at the Tier 1 level of the RTI model. Data was recorded via note-taking and



tape recording. Upon conclusion of the interviews, the interview documents were placed in a sealed envelope and stored in a secured file cabinet in the researcher's home prior to analyzing the data. I transcribed the interviews using a coding process. The next source of documentary data was RTI reports, and artifacts such as students' work samples.

### **Artifacts**

Deidentified students' class work samples were examined. These included some daily reading assignments, formative and summative assessments. For the reading class, the reading intervention teacher used various teaching tools such as computer assisted reading programs, one-on-one teaching, individualized reading, and skill building reading sets. Class work samples from some of these teaching tools were artifacts used in the study.

### **Documents**

Documents are used to pull together information and supplement evidence gathered from other sources Yin (2009). As noted by Creswell (2008), in order to construct a qualitative text data base, it is necessary to identify the types of documents that can provide useful information, and then have information reviewed for accuracy, completeness, and usefulness. After these steps are completed, the relevant information should be recorded.

Teacher referrals for RTI were used as documentation to support deidentified students' need for intervention at Tier 1 stage. Deidentified students' class report was evidence of student progress, and 9-week progress report was evidence whether Tier-2 reading intervention was working. Additionally, faculty meetings' minutes on RTI,

MTSS focus group meeting minutes, and school emails were examined. Yin (2009) noted that using documents as data collection helps improve and substantiate other sources of evidence. Upon conclusion of gathering documents, the documents were placed in a sealed envelope and stored in a secured file cabinet at my home prior to analyzing the data.

### **Data Analysis**

Analyzing data according to Creswell (2003) involves conducting assorted analyses, preparing the data for analysis, delving deeper into dissecting and comprehending the data, and deriving a conclusion from the interpretation of the broader significance of the data. Also, Merriam (1998) noted that analyzing data brings about a sense of clarity and meaning to the topic being researched. Hatch (2002) labeled five models of qualitative data analysis as typological, inductive, interpretative, political, and polyvocal. I used the inductive methods analysis based on specific findings from interviews and documentary data. According to Hatch (2002), inductive thinking proceeds from the specific to the general and pulls these pieces together into a meaningful whole. Inductive analysis begins with examining the particulars within the data and connecting patterns across individual observations to create the big picture. To analyze the data, a coding system was put in place. Rubin and Rubin (2005) noted that coding is a systematic way of examining and labeling all data derived from themes, concepts, and events and aligning them to the interviews.

### **Development of Case Narrative**

A case narrative is a compilation of evidence for a case based on information from various sources. Some of these sources are interviews, observations, focus groups, and documents. To develop a case narrative, Stake (1995) suggested that the researcher follow a flow of ideas which includes informing the reader about the genesis of the study, describing the case and its context, probing issues further, and summarizing the researcher's understanding of the case from reports. A case narrative was developed from interviews and documentary data. The conceptual framework was used to give accounts of how RTI was used in the classroom to assist students who have difficulty with reading comprehension. The evidence revealed how effective the reading class was in helping students gain mastery, acquire goals and expectations for student improvement, and what needs to be done to ensure continuation of the class. To facilitate analysis and understanding, the information was subject to interpretation based on categories of the conceptual framework. Thus, the case narrative rendered an account of the analytic categories supported by rich descriptions derived from interviews, artifacts, and documentary data.

### **Open Coding**

The data analysis used in this case study was open coding. Creswell (2003) encouraged qualitative researchers to assess data for expected and surprising themes that focus on a broader theoretical perspective. In essence, coding data involves taking raw data and reducing it into feasible bits of information. Corbin and Strauss (2008) stated

that open coding involves labeling words and phrases from data, and axial coding groups the open codes into themes or categories. When open and axial coding is completed, a central phenomenon is identified through selective coding. Park and Lee (2010) asserted that qualitative coding plays a vital part in data analysis by allowing the researcher to put data into categories to create themes. All data collected from this study was coded and analyzed to evaluate themes generated from the data. I used predetermined codes based on themes and categorize from the research questions. Initially, I coded the data manually according to research questions and as guided by the analytic features in the framework. See (Appendix I) for alignment of research questions to coding themes.

### **Transcription**

The interviews were transcribed and coded based on the research questions: In what ways is the high school reading class effective in improving at-risk students' reading, and how could the program be improved? How do teachers teaching the reading class conceptualize RTI? How does the RTI team conceptualize the reading class? What have been the benefits and challenges of the reading class? After the interview was completed, I reviewed the notes with the interviewee for accuracy. Next, I transcribed the notes after each interview. Upon completion of sorting, rewriting, and transcribing the interviews, I hand coded the information based on categories. The initial hand codes were aligned with the interview questions (Appendices F-H), and then the hand coded information were broken down into themes.

Hatch (2002) pointed out that this systematic way of putting data into categories helps to uncover themes that are similar and share common traits. According to Rubin

and Rubin (2005), the researcher has to take into consideration what is present and what is missing from the information in order to establish some early themes.

### **Thematic Development**

Creswell (2007) examined four computer programs for data analysis. They are Atlas.ti, NVivo, Maxqda, and Hyper Research. Originally, I had planned to use Hyper Research 3.0.3 qualitative data coding computer software to facilitate additional coding after the initial hand coding. Hyper Research is a qualitative software program that enables the researcher to code and retrieve data, construct theories, and perform data analysis (Creswell 2007; Hatch, 2002). This computer software sorts data according to codes (Appendix I) to the interviews, and documents. For instance, themes from interview transcripts are assigned a code that is uploaded to the software where the codes are sorted and the data analyzed to generate a report of the findings of the themes developed. After the themes are developed, coded data are regrouped and thematic categories are formed to guarantee that there are sufficient evidence to corroborate the findings that emerge from matching source materials. I did not use a software program to transcribe the information because I was able to manually transcribe the data following Hatch (2002) and Janesick's (2004) methods of coding and transcribing.

### **Procedures for Dealing With Discrepant Cases**

Cases that are opposed to the themes identified in the study are called discrepant (Merriam, 2002). Discrepant cases should be addressed because perspectives in life do not necessarily integrate; therefore, discourse on contradicting viewpoints makes the report credible. Some authors recommend purposefully seeking cases to contradict or

challenge one's findings (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Silverman, 1993). To address discrepant cases, I discussed the evidence for the identified themes as well as any general perspectives that may have contradicted the themes. Alternative or rival explanations for performance and other occurrences were examined and considered during data analysis. I ensured a realistic and valid representation of the findings through transparency and discussions. Findings from the data analysis were discussed in Sections 4 and 5.

### **Validity and Trustworthiness**

Validity is used to determine the accuracy of research findings from the researcher, participants, or reader's standpoint (Creswell & Miller, 2002). Terminologies such as authenticity, credibility, and trustworthiness are abundantly used for validity of qualitative studies (Creswell & Miller, 2002). Hence, researchers should employ validation strategies to corroborate the fidelity of their studies (Creswell, 2007). Yin (2009) agreed that case study findings would be more credible if information is acquired from several different sources.

### **Triangulation**

One validation strategy that was used in this qualitative case study was triangulation. According to Stake (2006), triangulation helps to make certain that the reader has a clear understanding of the information presented, that the information is not misleading, and is not influenced by personal bias. The data used for triangulation was interview responses and documentary data such as artifacts, emails, and faculty meeting and MTSS notes. The interview responses and documentary data were reviewed and

matched up to see what common themes existed among them. According to Creswell (2008), Hancock and Algozzine (2006), and Yin (2009), triangulation affords the ability to collect multiple sources of data that support the same common event.

Creswell (2008) noted that triangulation involves corroborating information from various sources. Furthermore, Yin (2009) states that a good case study will want to use several sources which will be highly complementary to the study. Thus, the case study would be more credible than if only one resource will be used (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006).

### **Member Checking**

Another validation strategy was member checking. Stake (2010) recommends having participants check the final report for accuracy as a form of member checking. I used member-checking to verify accuracy of the data from the interview transcripts. I allowed each interviewee to review the final transcript from their interview for accuracy.

Gay and Airasian (2000) noted that when researchers implement different strategies such as allowing participants to review transcripts, adding more time and participants to the study, and being cognizant of one's bias, trustworthiness is established. On the other hand, researchers who incorporate invalid information into a study pave the way for biases to occur. Gay and Airasian (2000) cautioned about this and stated that researchers should be aware of biases that threaten the validity of interviews. I aspired to preserve the integrity of this research study by employing the suggestions purported by qualitative researchers (Creswell, 2003; Hatch, 2002; Janesick, 2004; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Stake, 2010). I proposed to complete the research within the following timeline.

### **Timeline**

**Month 1, Week 1:** Data collection began after receiving approval from Walden University IRB. I went to the reading teacher before school to notify her that I received approval to begin the research and I needed her to de-identify the students in her class by blackening out their names and other identifiable indicators on progress reports and class work. Next, we arranged a day after school to collect copies of class work and progress report and discussed anything pertinent to the documents, and I took notes with her permission. We also made arrangements for a day and time to do a phone interview after school.

**Month 1, Week 2:** Phone calls lasting between 45 to 60 minutes were made to the adult participants on different days. The interview instrument in Appendix F, G, or H was used. The interview responses were recorded and stored in an envelope in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's class room.

**Month 1, Week 3:** The interview was transcribed and the collected data was coded and analyzed. All identifier such as adult participants and school was removed. After organizing and coding the data, I began analyzing the data.

**Month 1, Week 4:** More time was needed for transcribing and analyzing data.

### **Summary**

This section discussed the population, participants, procedures, and methodology used in this study. A qualitative case study was selected because of the small sample size and the use of interviews as the primary source of data collection. According to Janesick (2004) interviews provide the researcher with substantive data and are a major part of



qualitative research. Therefore, information on the effectiveness of RTI in improving at-risk students reading at the high school level was evident from the findings of this study. Findings from the study were shared with the principal and staff. Furthermore, this information was valuable to the school because it met AYP after 3 years on the Needs Improvement list and would need to continue to make AYP. Additionally, students' success in reading from RTI intervention could ensure continuation of the class in the future. Section 4, gave details about the data collection and data analysis.

## **Section 4: Results**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine how RTI was effective in improving reading difficulties of at-risk readers at the high school level. The research questions were designed to gain insight into participants' thoughts, knowledge, and experiences with RTI and the reading class. Section 4 presents the data that were collected and processed. The tracking process and emerging trends are described. Findings related to the research questions are also described; discrepant cases and nonconforming data are presented, as well as patterns, relationships, and themes that emerged from the study. The codes and themes that emerged from the data analysis are presented and discussed, evidence of quality measures is discussed, and the chapter concludes with a summary.

### **Data Collection Process**

The data collecting process began by collecting school documents such as the mission statement, policy statements, and email correspondence on RTI. I made notes on common themes from these documents to see if they were in alignment with each other. Additionally, I collected deidentified students work samples to ascertain if gains were made in reading based on GRASP reading probe results and made notes as to whether or not students made progress from their last summative assessment. Janesick (2004) and Creswell (2007) stated that journal writing allows for deepening knowledge, so I kept a reflective journal to record insights as themes developed.

Seven participants were purposefully selected to participate in the study. I met with them one-on-one in their classroom after school to describe the research study. They

were told why they were being invited to participate and the significance of their role as well as their possible contribution to the study. They were informed that their participation was totally voluntary and that they had the right to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. I gave them a letter of consent to participate in the study, and they returned their response to my mailbox. The participants who consented to be a part of the research notified me in person of a date and time for a phone interview to be conducted.

Janesick (2004) noted that interviewing is communicating, exchanging information, and receiving feedback on questions pertinent to the research. Yin (2009) also pointed out that interviews are designed to hone in on the topic of the case being studied to give an explanation from perceptions and inferences. The phone interviews were audio-taped and lasted approximately 45 minutes. They consisted of semistructured open ended questions that addressed the research questions in the study. The interview questions were adapted for different types of participants. For instance, the administrator's questions were different from the teachers' questions (Appendix F and G). Participants answered the interview questions and offered suggestions for improving at-risk students' reading and improving the reading program. The data from the interviews were used to make generalizations and explore themes about RTI and the reading intervention program.

### **Systems for Keeping Track of Data**

In order to keep track of data, I followed Creswell's (2003) five steps that aided in the process. He wrote that the data have to be organized, transcribed, sorted, and arranged

into categories. Secondly, the data have to be read through in order to get a general idea of the overall meaning of all the information. Thirdly, a coding system has to be in place in order to develop categories and themes. Fourthly, emerging themes have to be described. Lastly, the data have to be interpreted.

My method of keeping track of data was using a reflective journal (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). All information that was pertinent to the data was notated. I began by writing the participants' questions that would answer the research question. After writing the open ended questions, I coded the participants' identity to maintain confidentiality since I interviewed administrators and staff (Table 1).

Table 1

*Coding of Participants*

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Code</u>
Administrator 1:	A1
Administrator 2:	A2
Participant 1:	P1
Participant 2:	P2
Participant 3:	P3
Participant 4:	P4
<u>Participant 5:</u>	<u>P5</u>

After reviewing the taped interviews, I transcribed them and then used axial coding based on Janesick's (2004) examples of coding. I did not use a software program to transcribe the information because I was manually able to transcribe the data following Hatch

(2002) and Janesick's (2004) methods of coding and transcribing. I then summarized the salient points and wrote them in my journal using abbreviations for certain words. Using methods suggested by Hatch (2002), the participants' answers were then categorized based on codes where emerging themes, relationships, and patterns were discovered. These themes and interpretations were then written in a narrative passage. Measures to ensure security of the data included computer passwords and a locked file cabinet. All handwritten information, journals, and typed copies are securely stored at my house.

The data collected addresses the main research question: "In what ways is the high school reading class effective in improving at-risk students' reading, and how could the program be improved? Three subquestions followed to assist in the findings:

1. How do teachers conceptualize RTI?
2. How does the RTI team conceptualize the reading class?
3. What have been the benefits and challenges of the reading class?

My main focus was to link the interview questions from Appendix F, G, and H to specific themes that I found. For example, some questions from the Appendices were the following:

1. How has the school's leadership contributed to the RTI program?
2. How does the school's RTI model meet the needs of at-risk students?
3. How does the RTI model meet the needs of at-risk students?
4. In your opinion, how do teachers support the RTI model?
5. What methods or tools does the school use to evaluate the success of the RTI model?

Hatch (2002) suggested coding entries according to themes and patterns identified. My primary purpose was to link themes to the research questions. Findings from the interview discussions will be addressed below based on the following research questions and answers.

### **Interview Discussion**

When questions were asked about how teachers conceptualize RTI, participants A1 and A2 conceptualized RTI from two perspectives. A1 viewed RTI from the purposes of academic interventions whereas A2 viewed RTI from a behavioral perspective with an emphasis on mentorship. From the interview, A1 stated that the first step to consider students for RTI is for the parent to make a request for referral. The next step is to obtain demographic and background information and then meet individually with the students to determine what supports can be offered to them. A1 asserted that support teachers were responsible for RTI at the school, and they attended all county Student Support Team (SST)/RTI meetings, and they presented power points to staff on SST/RTI. At that time, the team was not a focus group as the Multi Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) is now. (RTI is now called MTSS). As the leader, A1 attended all SST meetings and made team decisions on steps for student intervention.

A2 is currently in charge of MTSS (RTI) and has put together a focus group of teachers, a counselor, and county personnel to revamp RTI and to bring more teacher awareness of students' problems. A2 deals with students' deficits in both academic and social areas. Since inheriting MTSS for the 2013-2014 school year, A2 has organized a committee to find interventions for students before they go down the wrong path. The

first few meetings focused on identifying students with behavior problems in class and pairing those students with a teacher mentor. A1 agreed that most teachers do a good job at mentoring students. Once the behavior is under control, teachers may be able to focus on students' academic deficits through intervention measures which the MTSS focus group is working on this semester.

Leadership believed that RTI also meets students' social needs. A1 remarked that RTI is not an IEP, but it gives an individualized plan both in and out of the classroom. For instance, inside the classroom, intervention is implemented for academic needs, whereas outside the classroom, intervention is solicited from the social worker who may refer a student for services based on the problem. Some at-risk students have been recipients of WIC (a government program that provides nutritious food for pregnant Women, Infants, and Children) and other social services. In essence, RTI supports students in all areas. A2 asserted that RTI specializes at meeting the needs of at-risk students who have varying needs.

RTI training is necessary so that all teachers are cognizant of the steps involved. A1 explained that teachers viewed power points on RTI during staff meetings and in-school professional development. A2 concurred that training occurs through professional development. In addition, information that the MTSS committee discussed at their monthly meetings are disseminated throughout the school via emails and through the departments. Regarding teacher training, most teachers agreed on the training methods provided. In response to the question if money and authority were no option in improving RTI, A1 would provide more resources for the teachers and have more reading certified

teachers, and A2 would provide the best training possible to staff and do it on a more frequent basis.

When asked to name one success discovered while implementing RTI, A1 remarked that inappropriate behavior ceases when students with behavior problems receive intervention. A2 asserted that getting to know these students on a personal level helps, and building relationships is important because it builds trust and cuts down on incidents that may be potentially harmful.

Teachers who discussed the leadership's contribution to RTI agreed that the current focus is on behavior. P1 stated that the administrator in charge has formed a MTSS focus group that meets once a month. P1 believed the administrators have contributed to the program, but they need to be more familiar with students in RTI. They are more focused on students with behavior issues as opposed to the academic side of RTI.

P2 commented that A1 was the former RTI leader, and now A2 is in charge of MTSS. With MTSS, a focus group is in place, which is important because more people are involved at every level. From being involved with the focus group, P2 believed that leadership contributes to RTI by supporting initiatives, giving more time to identify students, and placing these students in a blocked period called Instructional Focus (IF) which is helping some students. A positive outcome was that some RTI students have moved from Tier 3 to Tier 1.

When asked to describe how the school's RTI model meets the needs of at-risk students, teachers' opinions varied. P2 felt that the model is not meeting the academic



needs. Instead, mentoring programs are being set up, and leadership wants more evaluations performed. On the other hand, P2 believed that their needs are met by successfully following through on initial teacher referrals and having SST meetings. P4 had previously taught the reading class and remarked that students' needs were not met. These at-risk students were placed in study skills classes which did not meet their needs. Students need to be separated from study skills to gauge the various levels of their needs. P5 asserted that students' needs were met through intervention at the Tier 2 level, teacher referrals, and progress monitoring every 9 weeks. P1 commented that the school has implemented study skills classes, one-on-one tutoring, and before and after school tutoring to reach at-risk students. All teachers agreed that RTI's goal is to identify struggling students and assist them before they fall behind, thereby helping them to become successful.

### **Case Narrative**

**The Setting.** A case narrative was developed for this study from interviews, artifacts, and documents. The case studied was one high school in a southern state. The school implemented RTI for about 4 years but it had not been fully practiced. At the beginning of the study, one administrator was responsible for RTI and had focused on academic interventions through study skills classes. At the culmination of this study, another administrator assumed the position. The program is no longer called RTI but MTSS. This new administrator's focus is more on behavior intervention through mentorship.

MTSS has a focus group that meets once a month. Students' progress,

intervention strategies, classroom management, behavior issues, and mentorship are some of the topics discussed. There is great concern over the number of student referrals that lead to a disciplinary hearing. MTSS has assigned teacher mentors to at-risk students to help stem the escalating disciplinary hearings. MTSS's focus is to reduce students' unsavory behavior and redirect it to positive behavior through mentorship.

**Impetus for Change.** School documents revealed that a number of students were failing courses and were in need of intervention. The graduation coach and curriculum administrator implemented RTI intervention through a reading class. The goal was to see improvement in test scores for at-risk students who were reading below grade level. The first year had challenges with students acknowledging they had a reading problem. At the end of the school year, most students had dropped out of the class. The 2012-2013 academic school year was the second year for the reading intervention class. The first semester was challenging for the reading class since several students in the class did not improve their reading, and some dropped out of the class before the end of the semester. As a result, effective reading intervention within the RTI model was addressed in order to have successful continuation of the class and improved reading across the curriculum. The curriculum and instruction administrator stated, "We need more reading certified teachers. If we do, then we would be able to have more teacher involvement in recognizing and facilitating students with reading difficulties through modification and differentiation."

**Intervention Monitoring.** Students who need RTI intervention are tracked by the graduation coach and curriculum and instruction administrator. This is done through 9-

week grade report data where a list is generated for targeted at-risk students. Emails are sent to teachers to monitor students and provide additional scaffolding through intervention systems set up by the school such as before and after school tutoring. From these data, a reading intervention class was implemented 2 years ago. Two different teachers taught the class, and both concluded that the class was not effective in improving students' reading.

**Resources.** In the first year of the class, the reading teacher had very limited reading resources and had to rely on learned skill sets and Key Train computer programs. Additionally, students did not want to be in the class, which made it challenging to teach. By the end of the school year, more than half the students had dropped out of the class. This teacher found computer-based programs more practical for her situation. She stated, "I had limited resources and some were too elementary. What was a lifesaver was our Key Train computer program, so I would take them to the lab and do the exercises. This was more engaging and helped minimize the disruptions and discipline problems."

The second year had a new teacher. This time there were more students in the class, and again, several students queried their placement in the reading class. Additionally, there was a serious lack of reading resources and reading assessments to measure students' progress. Behavior was a big issue, and more instructional time was spent on discipline than instruction. This teacher found it very difficult to differentiate instruction due to class size and limited resources. She/he said, "I spent more time trying to get them to stay focused to complete the assignments, and refrain from getting into arguments or confrontations. They think the class is boring, and they do not belong in a

reading class because they could read. There were students who wanted to participate, but they soon conformed to peer pressure and lost focus as to why they were in the class.”

**Curriculum and Design.** Currently, the high school has no curriculum for reading. Teachers of the reading class stated that they had to be creative and pull information from different sources. They did not have standardized assessments to gauge students’ improvement. However, there was a school wide program designed to meet the needs of at-risk students. Instructional Focus (IF) was introduced in the 2013-2014 school year. This is a 90 minute block schedule where remediation is given to students based on their academic weakness once a week. It is in this block period that intervention takes place. Differentiation is practiced due to small class size and one-on-one instruction is feasible. Most teachers agree that IF is on the right course and would like to see it continue for the 2014-2015 school year.

**Goals and Objectives.** The goals and objectives of MTSS are to continue the reading class in the 2014-2015 school year. In the long run, students should be able to read at grade level and understand and make meaning of course content as they advance in grade levels. They should be able to examine and understand a multiplicity of disciplines based on the knowledge gained from the reading class, and should be able to pass state assessments in the various disciplines. Documentation from MTSS focus group meeting noted 4goals for the upcoming school year. The first goal is to have less discipline referrals. The second goal is to increase teacher/student mentorship. The third goal is to have more teacher participation in mentorship, and the fourth goal is to have more in-school professional development with the focus group members as facilitators.

Their objective is to keep the same team members so that the program can grow in a positive direction, and to ensure that students who need intervention would receive it.

**Effectiveness.** High school students need to be exposed to a variety of reading strategies and materials, but since there were no set guidelines for teachers to follow, there was little effectiveness in improving students' reading. P4 stated, "I had no reading material to go by and had to use resources from the internet. I had to be creative in my approach since there was not a curriculum for me to follow. I tried to expose them to different reading materials and strategies but they were mostly disinterested and preferred to do worksheets so they could finish quickly in order to socialize." The other reading teacher agreed that the class was not effective since "the students did not like to read and were more interested in image, saving face, and socializing." More time was spent on class management and less on reading instruction. P3 stated, "The class needs to be more structured and populated with the right students before results can be seen."

### **Findings**

This section includes a description of the findings that answer the research questions for this study. The following research questions were used as frames of analysis (Hatch,2002) to correlate the anomalies or commonalities from the data collected to determine whether RTI was effective in improving high school students reading skills.

#### **Research Question 1: How do teachers conceptualize the reading class?**

There were three main findings to how teachers conceptualized the reading class. The findings include the shift in MTSS' focus, MTSS' goals, and teacher training.

**Finding 1.** The first finding revealed that the reading class was an intervention

based on RTI principles, but the focus shifted from academics to discipline with the change of administrators. For instance, A1's concept of Response to Intervention (RTI) was to focus on academics, whereas A2's Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) initial focus was on stemming behavior issues before they escalate to a disciplinary hearing. They both agreed that inappropriate behavior is minimized when intervention occurs. A1 stated, "Once students with behavior issues receive intervention, the inappropriate behavior ceases. Getting to know these students on a personal level help because building relationships with them is important because it builds trust and cuts down on incidents that may be potentially harmful." A2 observed that, "Referrals for behavior issues have been reduced for those students receiving intervention through mentorship. Since emails were sent out with the names of at-risk students for teachers to mentor, the referrals have been declining."

**Finding 2.** The second finding revealed that participants agreed that RTI's goal is to assist struggling students by meeting their needs and helping them succeed. Two participants disagreed slightly on how leadership contributed to RTI and the reading class. One of them believed the focus is more on behavior as opposed to academics. Additionally, leadership needed to be familiar with who the RTI students are. Conversely, the other participant believed that leadership has allocated more time to identify students. After that, those students are placed in Instructional Focus where they receive additional scaffolding. Administrators believed that RTI is meeting students' needs on two fronts: academic and social. Academic needs are met through tiered intervention, and social needs are met through intervention from the school's social

services. Some participants agreed that students' academic needs are met through multiple intervention strategies while others disagreed that students' needs are being met. They believed RTI has placed more emphasis on mentoring, and students are placed in classes that do not cater to their academic needs.

**Finding 3.** The third finding revealed that administrators agreed that they would improve RTI by providing frequent training, have more resources for teachers, and have more reading certified teachers if money was not a problem. A1 stated, "If money and authority were no option, I would provide the best training possible to the staff and do it on a frequent basis. I would utilize the MTSS focus group to do in-school professional development so that everyone would be on board with what the group is doing, and a power point presentation would be available on the teachers' email. With the email, everyone would have access to the power point presentation to review as needed. I would also get representatives from schools that have successfully implemented MTSS to train our teachers." A2 stated, "I would provide more reading resources for the teachers so that they can differentiate instruction and I would get more teachers to be certified in reading. I would send teachers to conferences so they can come back and train other teachers on research based strategies that have been successfully implemented."

In conclusion, I found that administrators differed in their opinions of the program's focus. For instance, the current RTI administrator's focus is on student behavior. RTI is now known as Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and the intervention strategy is student mentorship targeted toward students with behavior problems. I found that the MTSS focus team is establishing student/teacher relationship

to avert disciplinary referrals and hearings. Once behavior is controlled, then students will be able to be more focused on academic interventions. If teachers are provided with more resources and training, then there should be more success for both teachers and students.

**Research Question 2: How does the RTI team conceptualize the reading class?**

There were five main findings to how the RTI team conceptualized the reading class. The findings include the effectiveness of the class, the need for more resources, how progress is monitored, how teachers are supported, and what are teachers' expectations.

**Finding 1.** The findings revealed that responses varied as to whether the reading classes were effective in improving at risk students' reading. A1 stated, "We thought it was. We had reading class in some students' schedule for the first implementation of the reading class but it was difficult to keep up with their progress; but now with Instructional Focus, we are able to better schedule students who would benefit from the class, so it might be effective." Other teachers concurred that Instructional Focus allowed for more scaffolding for students to build on prior knowledge. P2 stated, "We are more streamlined and are making better use of the time to address students' needs." P3 stated, "Instructional Focus is like a class that builds on the KWL principle, and because of this, struggling students stand to benefit from the additional help that we give them." P1 compose the students' failure list for each term and assigns the remediation classes for them. P1 noted that once students are properly placed, making gains in their areas of weakness is inevitable. Instructional Focus is a 90-minute block schedule section



specifically for remediation in all subject areas.

**Finding 2.** The findings revealed that in order to meet the needs of at-risk students with reading difficulties, programs and resources have to be in place to facilitate the students. Some teachers used computer-based programs while others utilized direct instruction. A1 stated, “We used Key Train. High schools have very limited resources since most of it is at the elementary level. We had the reading teacher who had a reading certified endorsement work with the students by using the skills she learned.” P2 agreed that Key Train computer program, tutoring, and Instructional Focus period for reading has benefited students. P4 disagreed and remarked, “I am not sure needs are being met because there is not an exclusive reading class for RTI. Too many kids are in study skills class to get one-on-one.” P1 on the other hand asserted that, “We are better now at who teach the classes, what they teach, or both.” P3 disagreed and asserted that the program is not where it can be since the students need more intensive help.

**Finding 3.** Findings revealed that teacher expectation for the reading class varied. P3 expected students who worked hard to come up one or several grade levels. P4’s expectation is to get more resources to use in the class. “At another school we had ‘book in a bag’ with examples of what the students read and different reading levels. Students need to do book reports.” P5 believed the class should be designed to identify struggling students using RTI and implementing interventions to improve these students reading ability. Additionally, these students should be screened and interventions should be implemented for the struggling readers.

**Finding 4.** The findings revealed that when it came to teacher support for the use

of RTI in reading classes, P1 believed there was no support because class sizes outweigh teachers' ability to individualize instruction and review. Since instruction cannot be differentiated within 40 minutes of instructional time, it is difficult to see intervention results. P2, however, noted that teachers are supportive as long as they don't have to teach the class or practice RTI in their classes. This participant noted this is a challenge.

**Finding 5.** For students with reading difficulties, this researcher hypothesized that a monitoring system has to be in place to gauge student progress. Some participants believe that this could be accomplished through academic progress monitoring at 9-week grading period and some teacher progress monitoring; through 9-week grades and interventions that are in place; pre-assessments and 9-week progress report; screenings to identify suspect at-risk students; monitoring student progress to assess where they are at. Only one disagreed and asserted that there was no reading instrument. "I took one off-line but it was not an accurate assessment to monitor where they were at." Participants noted that some formative assessments used to gauge students' progress are computer-based programs such as Key Train, online reading program, comprehension instruction from various books, multiple choice questions after reading, and reading leveled books. Some summative assessments used to assess students' progress are computer-based tests on Key Train. GRASP and POINT reading probes are the school's reading assessment probes. Only one participant commented that there were no summative assessment instruments.

In conclusion, my findings to RQ2 on RTI's team conceptualization of the reading class varied. One administrator remarked that class scheduling was challenging

with the initial reading class, but with the implementation of Instructional Focus, scheduling has been seamless; therefore, the class should be effective in meeting at-risk students' needs. Some participants agreed that the RTI model met students' needs through the use of Key Train computer program. Others disagree that the students' needs were being met because there was not a reading class exclusive to RTI. Instead, students were placed in study skills classes with too many students; therefore, they could not obtain individualized attention because more intensive help was needed for them to be at grade level reading. Participants who taught the reading class would like to get resources to practice differentiation according to students' diverse reading levels so that students who work hard would come up several grade levels. Participants agreed that formative assessments are used to monitor students' progress every 9 weeks. School wide emails are generated frequently reminding teachers to be up to date with in-putting grades into Infinite Campus so that students' progress can be monitored and intervention can be implemented. Some summative assessments include in-school reading assessment probes such as GRASP and Key Train computer-based reading tests. Only one participant remarked that there was no summative assessment instrument. Overall, participants asserted that there is not much support from most teachers for the use of RTI in reading classes mostly because class sizes outweigh teachers' ability to give individualized attention to those in need. Additionally, instruction is limited to 40 minutes therefore one-on-one instruction is challenging. Another assertion was that the teachers who may support it will do so only because they do not have to teach the class.

### **Research Question 3: What Have Been the Benefits and Challenges of the Reading Class?**

There were three main findings on the benefits and challenges of the reading class. The findings include the use of reading probes, various instructional methods, and challenges on various fronts.

**Finding 1.** Participants were asked about the success of the reading class. Most agreed that reading probes were beneficial to both teachers and students. P3 commented, “Can’t say for the school, but when I had the class, one or two students did improve their reading by one grade level.” P4 remarked, “One success I can think about for the one year I had the class is that we were using the in school reading probes to gauge student’s reading level.” According to P2, some resources that are in place to facilitate the reading class are Key Train program and GRASP probes which proved to be beneficial to at-risk students. P2 asserted, “We are more familiar with reading probes such as POINT and GRASP and more teachers are using them. EOCT scores would be higher if students could read.” P5 agreed that reading probes are in place for students and is more widely used among special education teachers as opposed to regular education teachers.

P5 stated, “As a special education teacher, students who have a reading goal in their IEP have benefited from using the GRASP reading probes for Tier 4 documentation.” In order to make the reading class more successful, P1 suggested that more reading certified teachers are needed since there are only three teachers with reading certification. More reading certified teachers’ expertise in reading strategies will

be beneficial to students and may make the classes more appealing to students.

**Finding 2.** When questions were asked about successes derived from various instructional methods, some participants commented on direct teaching instruction. P2 stated that one-on-one works for those who really want to learn to read and are not embarrassed to share their struggles with the teacher. These students would let you know why they do not want to be called out to read aloud, and they would make time to get individualized instruction while the class is working. However, most students get bored and prefer to work independently on the computer. P3 commented that there is limited success because of time constraints, and P5 asserted that direct instruction promotes a positive attitude toward learning by both teacher and student. Students have benefited from one-on-one attention because it hones in on their specific deficit.

Regarding the level of success derived from computer assisted instruction, P2 stated that students who use it seem to do better with consistency. Because there is immediate feedback and explanation to incorrect answers, students seem to get better scores after each attempt. P3 stated that results vary. “It is very good for students who will do the work on it. For those who did, their grades improved. However, there are those who won’t do the work regardless of what you say or do.”

To answer the question on the success derived from independent reading, P3 commented that students with behavior problems dominated instructional time, therefore more time was spent utilizing behavior strategies, and by the time students settled down, it was time to go; therefore, not much success was derived from independent reading. On the other hand, P5 stated that independent reading builds fluency, increases vocabulary,

and allows students the chance to practice the strategies they've learned through guided reading and reading aloud.

**Finding 3.** The findings revealed that there were challenges in several areas. When questions were asked about the challenges the school faced since implementing RTI and the reading class, P1 commented that there are not enough reading classes and reading certified teachers to meet the need. P2 believed that finding the time to fit the class into the students' schedule and placing the correct students in the correct class has been challenging. Another challenge was students who had behavior problems hindered those who could really be helped. Also, student apathy was a problem since most students didn't like to read.

Regarding the question about students' challenges with the reading class, P3 stated that embarrassment was a major issue because students would not read in front of their peers, and not even quietly to themselves. P4 stated, "They didn't realize why they were in the class. They were aware of image and reputation and did not want to be labeled as not being able to read. Peer image took precedent over reading needs. They believe they did not have a reading problem and should not be in the class with some other students." Grade leveled text books, content reading, and comprehension proved to be challenging to most students in the class.

According to P2, some resources that are in place to facilitate the reading class are Key Train program and GRASP probes which proved to be beneficial to at-risk students. P5 agreed that reading probes are in place for students and is more widely used among special education teachers as opposed to regular education teachers.

In conclusion, the results showed that there were more challenges than benefits of the reading class. One benefit to the class, shown by the data, is that some practices allowed students to build fluency, increase vocabulary, and get the chance to practice the strategies they learned, especially from Key Train. Another benefit is that one or two students increased their reading level by one grade, and in-school reading probes have increased. Some challenges included scheduling, student placement, lack of certified reading teachers, and reading resources. Major challenges were student related. Behavior, apathy, dislike for reading, embarrassment, and denial that they have a reading problem were discovered to be student challenges with the reading class. For some students, content level reading was arduous. Minimal success was derived from direct teaching instruction and independent reading.

### **Relationships to Literature**

For some high school students, reading across the curriculum may be challenging because of content difficulty. Biancarosa (2006) asserted that high school students are challenged to some degree by difficult text reading as well as greater learning expectations in content knowledge (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Brozo & Simpson, 2007). P3 stated, "Students in my class resisted reading from textbooks. What I realized was that content reading proved to be very challenging for most of them." Worthy and McKool (1996) noted that often high school students struggle with the interpretation and meaning of content found in text books and assignments. Some of these students labor over unfamiliar or technical vocabulary and may lack the ability to formulate questions, while those who cannot comprehend text may give up. P4 mentioned that students do not know

how to use context cues to figure out what they are reading and therefore shut down and do not participate. Beers (2003) asserted that the challenge for these students is in text interpretation.

Some reading advocates (Allington, 2002; Greenleaf et al., 2001; Guthrie, Schafer, & Wang, 1995; Ivey, 1999; Pressley, 1997; Purcell-Gates et al., 2002) recommend a student-centered, constructivist approach to reading that is interdisciplinary in nature. Atwell (1998) and Carbo (1997) noted that reading initiatives should be developed for struggling readers. These researchers supported the use of challenging reading materials that is not overwhelming and relevant to student interest. Both researchers suggested that student interest in reading materials was linked to motivation to read. P5 stated, "I have sports magazines, readers digest, novels and lower level books to encourage reading when they are finished with their assignments." The National Research Council (2004) agreed that motivation is an important factor for older students who continue to struggle with reading.

As noted in Elliot (2008), research supports the core principles on which RTI is based, and demonstrates the general effectiveness of RTI through the assumption that all students can learn, that educators must identify areas of concern at an early onset, and classroom instruction must be differentiated in order for students to achieve high rates of success. P3 noted that Key Train computer program was a means of differentiation for students who did not embrace direct teacher instruction or group activities. For students with reading difficulties, challenges may be derived from one or a combination of the following: activating prior knowledge, reading comprehension, and fluency. Torgesen et



al. (2007) noted that there is much need for secondary schools to utilize a combination of reading strategies for students who struggle with reading. P4 stated, "When I had the reading class, I used a variety of teaching methods on an ongoing basis because one day it would work and another day the same strategy may not work, so I always had to be trying different methods of teaching reading." Allington (2006) agreed that in order to make meaning of text, a combination of differing strategies will have to be in place.

One reading strategy to assist students with reading difficulties is activating prior knowledge. Allington (2006) noted that when one activates prior knowledge, it is tapping into information already known and making predictions before reading and during reading. A case study by Ambe (2007) on adolescent reading explored the use of activating prior knowledge before, during, and after reading. It was discovered that what students learned and retained previously can impact their understanding of information in course texts. Only one teacher mentioned KWL. P3 stated, "Instructional Focus is like a class that builds on the KWL principle, and because of this, struggling students stand to benefit from the additional help that we give them. From the KWL principle, we can customize our instruction to meet the students' needs." Ambe concluded that activating prior knowledge should be developed and encouraged for individual, small group, and classroom instruction in order to facilitate improvement in student reading, and making gains toward better reading achievement. P5 stated, "Before reading, I set a foundation for reading success by activating prior knowledge. By doing this, I validate past learning by generating interest. This will help them later connect new information to what they already know."

Another strategy to assist students with reading difficulty is comprehension. Lapp, Fisher, and Grant (2008) conducted a qualitative case study which focused on student-centered activities, discussions, and teacher thinking aloud as interactive strategies toward acquiring comprehension knowledge. P4 stated that grade leveled text books, content reading, and comprehension proved to be challenging to most students in the class.

A final strategy is fluency. Rasinski et al. (2005) asserted that fluency is the most important factor to facilitate successful reading with high school students. P5 stated, "Independent reading builds fluency, increases vocabulary, and allows students the chance to practice the strategies they've learned through guided reading and reading aloud." When fluency is improved, students can make significant gains in reading comprehension. Smith (2007) concluded that the act of daily reading will improve students' ability to read. P2 stated, "One benefit to the class is that some practices allowed some students to read more fluently, which increased their confidence, and allowed them to showcase what they learned." Allington (2006) agreed that if students are provided with texts that are appropriate for their reading level, fluency usually improves whereby students can read independently and then make gains toward reading comprehension. P4 stated, "They enjoyed books from the media center that they were interested in. That's the only time I saw them interested in reading because they could choose whatever they wanted to read."

### **Relationships to Framework**

The conceptual framework for this research inquiry was based on the constructivist learning theory which takes into account the learner's individual needs (Benjamin, 2002). One model of the theoretical view of constructivism in the classroom is small group instruction with a concentration on teaching reading skills and strategies. A2 stated, "With the implementation of Instructional Focus, we are better able to put students in smaller class sizes based on their areas of deficits, thus making differentiation more feasible for the teachers." Benefits to the constructivist learning approach include differentiated instruction with small groups based on the ratio of student to teacher (Benjamin 2002; Tomlinson, 2001). P1 had a different opinion on class size and stated, "Class sizes outweigh teachers' ability to individualize instruction and review. It is difficult to practice RTI intervention with 30 students and instruction cannot be differentiated within 40 minutes of instructional time, therefore it is difficult to see intervention results." Tomlinson (2003) encouraged the use of differentiated instruction as a way for both teacher and students to maximize instruction. Bender (2008) noted that when teacher and student can focus on the specific skill that challenges the student, and the teacher can closely monitor struggling students' progress, then RTI provides the strongest basis for differentiation of instruction. Hence, RTI is the other framework for this study.

### **Discrepant Cases and Nonconforming Data**

When discrepancy is found in the participants' responses to the themes discovered in the research, it adds credibility to the research because they are contradictory to the themes identified. Creswell (2008) asserted that when contradiction is present from the information garnered, allowances are made for a theme not to be confirmed. Because agreement is not always present, discussing controversial evidence enhances credibility to the findings. Merriam (2002) suggested that reviewing transcripts should be employed to locate discrepant cases; thus, two areas of discrepancy were found.

The first discrepancy was found in the use of Key Train, a computer-based program. One participant believed that Key Train was useful in helping-at-risk students prepare for state tests because that participant (P2) used it regularly. P3 however, stated that students had minimal use of Key Train because they had to sign up to use the lab and there was no specific computer lab for reading.

The other discrepancy was found in how students' progress was monitored. P1 stated, "Every 9 weeks we generate a progress report so parents, students, and teachers can monitor students' progress and make adjustments for remediation." P2 stated, "It is monitored through grades, formal and informal assessments, and interventions that we put in place." P3 stated, "There was no reading instrument to monitor students' progress. I took one off the web but it was not an accurate assessment to monitor where they were at." P4 stated, "I used computer programs and probes as my reading assessment tools and also 9 week grade report." P5 asserted, "I usually give a pre-assessment and then monitor

how they are doing on their work to assess where they are at. At the end of the 9 week grading period, I give a post-assessment to see what they learned.” One participant noted that there was no reading instrument to assess students’ reading levels, while others agreed that students’ progress are monitored every 9 weeks through progress reports based on their aforementioned comments.

### **Patterns and Themes**

Three major themes emerged from the findings. These themes were in alignment with the research questions and theories from the literature review. I interviewed seven participants using interview questions from Appendices F, G, and H. The interviews were taped, transcribed, coded, and categorized according to themes (Hatch, 2002; Janesick, 2004). I kept a reflective journal to keep track of the data (Creswell, 2007; Janesick, 2004; Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

*The first theme was that RTI’s conceptualization varied among administrators and participants.* Administrators’ purpose for RTI shifted over the periods they served. The first administrator focused on academics while the second administrator focused on behavior. A1 conducted in-school RTI professional development at the beginning of the school focusing on academic gains toward meeting AYP. Participants believed that since RTI has changed to MTSS, the focus has shifted more toward discipline and less on academics. This was supported by MTSS focus group meeting documents. When compared to RTI’s emails which highlighted students’ failure in three or more subjects, MTSS’s documents disseminated to the school was for teachers to be mentors to at-risk students with behavior referrals.

*The second theme was that computer-based programs were the preferred method for gauging students' reading progress despite the limited reading resources.* I collected school documents such as emails pertinent to RTI, and artifacts such as de-identified students' work samples (Table 2). Once these were collected, I proceeded to analyze the data. Students had 3 minutes to read a passage and circle the correct word in parenthesis that best fits the context of each sentence. The probe was issued at the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester. Only students who had reading goals as part of their RTI intervention completed the probe. These students were given the probe in the computer lab with the RTI/SST lead teacher. Results from the probe indicate that students A and F gained 5 points and students B and E gained 6 points. This information was shared with students' teachers so they can differentiate instruction accordingly. The students who were on the same reading levels could be paired up or grouped with other leveled readers to help with reading comprehension. Hence, most participants found the computer programs beneficial to other teachers.

*The last theme that emerged was that most students were not engaged in the class.* Some reasons were embarrassment, image and reputation, labeling, and denial that they had a reading problem. P3 stated, "Most students didn't like to read. They want you to give them the answers so they can finish the assignment to socialize. I believe reading starts from early and some of them find it difficult to keep up. Many of them questioned why they were in the class because they did not believe they belonged there." P4 stated, "Students who had behavior problems hindered those who could really be helped. They were more caught up in image rather than learning because they had a reputation to keep

up. After a while, this negative attitude toward reading rubbed off on the ones who originally were interested. Eventually, most lost interest because being “cool” was more important than learning to read. P5 stated, “Apathy played a big role in whether or not they succeeded. Some of them were embarrassed to read aloud or even silently to themselves because they did not want each other to know their reading level because they were afraid to be labeled by their peers. Kids can be cruel to each other and they don’t realize how their words/ taunting could shut down someone even though they say they were joking.” Table 2 shows the deidentified data.

Table 2

*Deidentified Student Data From GRASP Reading Probe*

Student	First Probe NC	Last Probe NC	Points Gained
A	18	22	5
B	23	29	6
C	10	11	1
D	19	19	0
E	15	21	6
F	15	20	5
G	18	22	4
H	10	13	3

*Note.* NC= Number of words correct out of 48. The reading was timed for 3 minutes.

### **Evidence of Quality**

Ethical guidelines ensured that participants' rights were protected as well as quality of data. Before any data could be collected, I had to obtain approval from Walden University's IRB. Once the approval was obtained, I met with the participants to discuss the voluntary nature of the study, the confidentiality of their identity, and their right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. I explained to them the purpose of the study, how the data will be collected, and my availability to them if they needed further clarification of anything pertaining to the study. I gave them a consent form to sign if they agreed to be a part of the study.

Evidence of quality showed how the study followed protocol to assure accuracy of data. This was accomplished through member-checking and triangulation. In order to determine whether the findings accurately reflected the real situation and the evidence supported the conclusion of the findings, participants engaged in member-checking by reviewing the final interview transcripts to verify accuracy of the data from the interviews. They agreed with the transcription.

Creswell (2008), Hancock and Algozzine (2006), and Yin (2009) asserted that triangulation affords the ability to collect multiple sources of data that support the same common event. The data used for triangulation were interview responses, artifacts of students' work samples, and documentary data such as emails and notes on RTI/MTSS policy from focus group meetings. For example, school wide emails on MTSS mentorship and 9-week progress monitoring were triangulated with participants'



interview responses. The interview responses, artifacts, and documentary data were reviewed and matched up to see what common themes existed among them. The interview responses were the primary source of data. When matched with student work samples in Table 2, emails, and MTSS focus group minutes, I found common themes existed for student reading improvement, RTI's focus, student involvement in the reading class, and preferred method for teaching reading.

Being that I work at the school, there was fidelity with the participants. Trustworthiness was addressed by the researcher's transparency and stated biases. According to Merriam (2002), researchers need to provide an "audit trail" as evidence of reliability and authentication of the data and research results. To provide an audit trail, I kept a journal as a form of reflection on the data collected. From this documentation, other researchers may be able to gain insight into the data collection process and how the results were derived.

### **Summary**

Section 4 offered a detailed description of the findings of my study that were based on the three research questions that were the framework of the instrumental case study. Also described in section 4 were the data collection process, findings of the study, discrepant and nonconforming cases, patterns and themes that developed, and evidence of the data quality. Section 5 discussed interpretations of the findings, implications for social change, and recommendations for future research.

## Section: 5: Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Overview**

Section 5 begins with a brief overview of why and how the study was done, a review of the questions being addressed, and a brief summary of the findings. Also included are the interpretation of the findings, implications for social change, recommendations for action, recommendations for further study, and my reflections. I used a qualitative instrumental case study to examine whether RTI was effective in improving reading skills of at-risk high school students with reading difficulties. At the research site, some students with reading difficulties were given the opportunity to remedy the situation through a reading class. My aim was to discover what role RTI played in improving students' reading from the perspectives of the seven participants who work at the research site. I compared their interview responses to see what commonalities existed, and then I triangulated the data with deidentified students' work samples, emails, and RTI/MTSS minutes. Interviews, artifacts, and documents were evidentiary sources used for triangulation to ensure credibility and reliability of the findings (Hatch, 2002). Data was analyzed based on assigned categories from Appendix I. I used open-coding to find commonalities for the following research questions:

1. How do teachers conceptualize RTI?
2. How does the RTI team conceptualize the reading class?
3. What have been the benefits and challenges of the reading class?

The following section covers the research findings.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The study focused on participants' viewpoints of how RTI is conceptualized, instructional practices in the reading class, and the benefits and challenges found in the reading class. Several case studies were examined to authenticate the data in the literature review. From the constructivist framework, small group instruction with a concentration on teaching reading skills and strategies was employed. Benefits to the constructivist learning approach include small group differentiated instruction based on the ratio of student to teacher. From the interview questions, I found that students who are not embarrassed about their reading deficits benefit from one-on-one instruction. Based on the research outcomes from the literature review and interview questions, an instrumental case study was used to examine whether RTI was effective in improving reading skills of at-risk high school students with reading difficulties.

The findings in this case study were compared with the literature presented in Section 2. From the results, I found that students with reading difficulties are challenged with content area text reading based on the levels of difficulty and are reluctant to participate in activities geared toward reading improvement. Researchers such as Biancarosa and Snow (2006) and Broza and Simpson (2007) noted that high school students are challenged to some degree by difficult text reading as well as greater learning expectations in content knowledge. One participant observed that students' motivation to read is linked to their interest in the text material. Although this may be so, other participants stated that there were no set reading text materials, and they had to be creative with instructional materials. Some used a combination of direct instruction, one

on one, and computer-based reading programs. From the data analysis, I found that those who used computer-based programs had better results than those who used other methods. For instance, some students moved from a Tier 3 to Tier 1 status, and one student's reading increased by one grade level. Findings from Table 2 report on students' GRASP reading probe indicate that students had some increase on their scores from their second reading probe.

The findings established a relationship between meeting students' academic needs and class placement. Students who were placed in study skills for reading did not want to read in front of their peers. O'Brien et al. (2009) asserted that struggling readers refrain from reading because they do not read at grade level, especially in comparison to their peers' proficiency. With the implementation of an RTI intervention called Instructional Focus (IF), students are now placed in remediation classes according to their academic needs. Denton et al. (2010) agreed that many students obtain intervention through RTI because they have difficulty with reading.

I found that administrators differed in their opinions of the program's focus. For instance, the current RTI administrator's focus is on student behavior. The findings have established a relationship between student behavior and academic success. RTI is now known as MTSS, and the intervention strategy is student mentorship targeted toward students with behavior problems. I found that the MTSS focus team is establishing student/teacher relationship to avert disciplinary referrals and hearings. Once behavior is controlled, then students will be able to be more focused on academic interventions. According to the CEC (2009), school leadership is vital to RTI because strong

collaborative leadership helps schools develop a strong core program. In order for the school to improve RTI/MTSS, there needs to be consistency with the program. The interpretation and findings from the overarching research question and subquestions will be discussed.

### **Conclusion 1**

The overarching research question asked in what ways is the high school reading class effective in improving at-risk students' reading, and how could the program be improved. Based on the interview responses discussed in Section 4, it can be concluded that the reading class was not effective in improving at-risk students' reading. For instance, instructional strategies, reading resources, and students' engagement were some factors that contributed to the non-effectiveness of the class. Participants stated that the reading class can be effective (a) if it is implemented properly, (b) if it has consistency and relevancy to the student, (c) if students have a slot in their schedule to accommodate the class, (d) if only students with reading difficulties are populated in the class, (e) if there was a reading curriculum in place from which to work, and (f) if there are more reading certified teachers. From these responses, I concluded that the class was not properly implemented. Students who did not have significant reading deficits were populated in the class, resulting in disinterest and apathy. Additionally, there was not a reading curriculum, the reading teachers had to create their own lessons, and only one reading teacher had a reading certification.

**Conclusion 2**

The other part of the question asked how the program can be improved. Most participants agreed that IF has been instrumental in improving the program. Before IF, most students were placed in study skills classes. These classes were not equipped to meet students' individual needs because there was a blend of students with reading and non-reading difficulties. For those students who were not reading on grade level, saving face was more important than learning to read. As a result, embarrassment was a major factor that hindered student progress. The implementation of IF for the 2013-2014 school year reduced the number of students with reading difficulties being placed in study skills. IF has been successful with student placement according to their academic needs.

Responses varied to Research Question 1 on how teachers conceptualized the reading class. My findings indicated that the reading teachers believe that students did not benefit from the reading class mostly because there was not a set reading curriculum and they had to pull from multiple teaching sources. Some used direct instruction, one on one, and computer programs. The strategy that seems to be the most popular was Key Train. Participants stated that the computer lab with the Key Train program and GRASP reading probe have proven to be beneficial to students. One participant disagreed and stated that there is not a specific reading lab, and you (the teacher) have to sign up to use the computer lab. As a result, some students did not have access to the Key Train reading program. Participants agreed that formative assessments are used to monitor students' progress every 9 weeks. Some summative assessments include in-school reading

assessment probes such as GRASP and Key Train computer-based reading tests. Participants who taught the reading class would like to get resources to practice differentiation according to students' diverse reading levels so that students who work hard would come up several grade levels. Bender (2008) noted that when the teacher and student can focus on the specific skill that challenges the student and the teacher can closely monitor the struggling student's progress, then RTI provides the strongest basis for differentiation of instruction. Another participant stated that students are not receptive to one on one individualized instruction due to embarrassment. Most believed that administrators' focus was not on reading intervention through RTI but on mentorship through MTSS. From the administrators' perspectives, RTI is meeting students' needs through tiered intervention and IF.

Research Question 2 on RTI's team conceptualization of the reading class varied. Before IF, students who had reading difficulties were placed in the reading class with students who did not have a reading problem. This resulted in behavior issues, low reading participation, apathy, and embarrassment. I found that class size was major issue because there were 18 to 20 students minimum in the reading class. Students who were placed in study skills classes for reading intervention could not receive the help they needed because more intensive individualized help was required for them to be reading at grade level. For the most part, participants believed that class size hindered individualized attention for those who needed it, and the instructional time of 40 minutes was not enough to facilitate one on one instruction. Prior to IF, the team conceptualized the reading class as ineffective. However, with the implementation of IF for the 2013-

2014 school year, team members believed that IF has been successful in placing at-risk students in the right settings according to their areas of weaknesses.

Data revealed that benefits to the reading class were that students got a chance to practice the strategies they learned from the repeated use of Key Train. Hence, students seem to do better with computerized programs. Additionally, reading probes have increased, and students with reading difficulties are tested twice per semester on the GRASP reading probe.

Data also revealed that challenges were twofold: from the teachers' perspectives and the students' perspectives. Teachers noted that some of the challenges were scheduling and placing students in the correct class and not enough reading resources. They concurred that minimal success was derived from direct teaching instruction and individualized attention.

Major challenges were student related. One major issue was behavior. Because there were readers and nonreaders placed in a large size class, part of the instructional time was compromised by dealing with student disruptions. For instance, students who did not have a reading problem complained about being in the class and viewed the class negatively. Students who had a reading problem did not want to be associated with the class and did not want to participate in reading activities due to embarrassment and saving face amongst peers. It was difficult to practice differentiation, read aloud, and one on one for students who needed it partly because of student apathy and negativity that was pervasive throughout the class.

Practicing differentiation to improve student achievement in reading is based on



the constructivist theory of learning. Painter and Painter (2008) asserted that teaching from a constructivist perspective results in more effective instruction that results in greater achievement outcomes for students. Matching student's needs with high-quality intervention and instruction in order to gain the best outcomes for student learning is one component of the RTI framework (Reutebuch, 2008).

Rampey, Dion, and Donahue (2009) noted approximately two thirds of eighth to 12<sup>th</sup> grade students read at less than the proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. On the local level, the school's reading assessment is GRASP. The findings concluded that some students made gains between their first and second reading probes by 2 and 4 points (Table 2). Therefore, it can be concluded that there was some reading improvement, but not significant enough.

### **Implications for Social Change**

In the study, the effectiveness of RTI to improve high school students' reading skills was examined. The results of this study may affect change in how RTI is used as an intervention tool for at-risk high school students with reading difficulties. This study provided an opportunity for teachers and administrators to express their views of RTI and the reading intervention class. The participants in the study recommended that students with reading difficulties be placed in small reading class sizes, that there be a reading curriculum, and that computer-based programs be utilized. The MTSS focus group recommended pairing students with behavior problems with teacher mentors. If administrators, teachers, and parents work together to improve students' behavior, then there may be more academic success through interventions to increase student

achievement. This will have a positive impact on the schools, districts, and community. High school students who master content level reading are better prepared for postsecondary transitioning into college or the work force and are better able to navigate themselves into society as opposed to students who do not have a grasp on reading.

### **Recommendations for Action**

The information in this research will be used to help at-risk students make gains in their coursework, thus increasing their chances of being successful. It will also assist the school in identifying existing instructional weaknesses in the RTI reading class. Torgesen et al. (2007) stressed that there is much need for secondary schools to utilize a combination of reading strategies for students who struggle with reading. Lapp et al. (2008) concluded that in order for students to make gains in reading achievement, teachers need to use interactive strategies combined with their expertise in the field. I recommend that Key Train and GRASP computerized programs be utilized more based on the data analysis. District-wide programs, such as POINT and other literacy programs, are on the school district's website for teachers to use. I recommend that teachers learn and implement these programs to see what works best for students' needs. I recommend more reading resources be available to the teachers and students so that instruction can be differentiated through leveled reading. I also recommend more in school professional development on the purpose, function, and implementation of RTI/MTSS interventions. Lastly, I recommend a reading curriculum to streamline the program.

This study will be significant to administrators, teachers, students, and parents and would be beneficial to schools, especially those who are in the initial stages of

implementing a RTI reading class. The results of this study might be disseminated to the building principal, administrators, and the MTSS focus team during their monthly meeting. I hope that the administrators will look at the data and provide reading materials for the class since teachers had to be creative and create their own materials. From this, there should be a reading curriculum for high schools that I hope will be implemented in the near future. I would like to see more reading classes implemented in high schools to meet the needs of many students who mask their deficits and continue to fall behind in content area reading.

At the March, 2014 MTSS monthly meeting, the question was raised as to how to make the program better. I believe that this study has addressed that question. The team decided to keep the current members for next school year so that there may be continuity and improvement to the program. The team may use the results as a guideline to improve MTSS and as a guideline for in school professional development. In the interview response, one administrator stated that if money was not an option, there would be a continuation of professional development on a frequent basis.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This study examined the effectiveness of RTI to improve high school students' reading skills. Further research needs to be conducted on a larger scale because the study was limited to a small sample size. The limitations of this study and the literature review allude to areas that warrant further research.

Some areas for research consideration are related to RTI, implementing a reading class, and instructional strategies to improve at-risk students' reading at the high school

level. These should be oriented towards reading comprehension strategies. For students with reading difficulties, challenges may be derived from a combination of factors such as activating prior knowledge, vocabulary development, and reading fluency.

Based on the findings, high school students need to be exposed to a variety of reading strategies and materials. Some strategies should be geared toward resistive readers and word callers. According to Tovani (2000), resistive readers are those who choose not to read; word callers are those who can decode words, but cannot derive meaning or apply critical thinking to what has been read. Therefore, a more in-depth study can be done on reading strategies that result in skill sets to derive meaning from text.

Another study can compare and contrast reading curriculums across school districts to improve reading at the high school level. From my research interviews, the reading teachers noted that there was not a reading curriculum at the research site. If research can be done on the implementation of high school reading curriculum, the results may determine if reading success is derived from set standards taught. This may lead to successful implementation of reading classes across school districts.

Another area to explore is the purpose of RTI/MTSS in high schools. Based on the research results, RTI has been changed to MTSS and the focus is on behavior. Future studies can be done on the effectiveness of MTSS in the classroom from the teacher's perspective.

In retrospect, I believe an observational study would have added to the richness of the data. I would have observed first-hand teaching strategies, students' behavior, and

their responses to the intervention strategies. I wished I could have observed two high schools' data and examine the correlation between instructional strategies and reading improvement.

My inspiration toward this research topic came from observing the struggles that high school students encounter, especially in the special education and collaborative classrooms. O'Brien, Steward, and Beach (2009) asserted that struggling readers refrain from reading because they do not read at grade level, especially in comparison to their peers' proficiency. Additionally, other researchers such as Greenleaf and Hinchman (2009) and Vacca (2006) contended that students who have confidence in their reading ability have a better chance of understanding the content from what they are reading. The authors in these studies looked at students' reading deficits and applied various intervention strategies to help students who struggle with reading comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary development. My main objective was to inspire others to purposefully reach out to students with reading difficulties by differentiating instruction and utilizing RTI reading strategies to help students make gains toward reading across the curriculum by constructing meaning from text.

### **Reflection**

When I started this research, RTI was in the early stages of implementation at the research site. At the beginning of the school year, during preplanning, information was disseminated about RTI and the importance of implementing it in the classrooms. But throughout the year, not much attention was given to it, and not many teachers practiced tiered interventions. Additionally, I taught several students who struggled with content

area text and saw the frustration first hand. For the majority of these students, learning was an arduous task and some eventually dropped out. I was moved by the frustration some of these students encountered and this was the motivation for me to do the study. I wanted to find out how RTI could improve reading for at-risk students with reading difficulties.

Before the study, there was discussion about implementing a reading class, and the next school year, one class was introduced. I was excited that finally, there was going to be a solution to students' reading problems. I felt the students would also be excited as I was, but during the research and talking with the teachers, students were not engaged and did not benefit from the class. I was disappointed because I thought this was going to be the solution.

Identifying the problem was a challenge. I had to consider what area of intervention needed to be researched. From the literature review studies on reading intervention, I discovered that there was more intervention done at the elementary school level than at the high school level, so I determined to hone in specifically on RTI and reading for students who were at-risk readers at my school. Samuels (2009) asserted that there is a lack of research on RTI at the high school level, so this was a good place for more research to be continued.

Once I made the decision, I had to follow the required steps for each section. For Section 1, I had to identify the problem and then restate it in the problem statement, and give supporting evidence to justify the problem. Coming up with the research question to answer the problem was challenging. I asked myself several questions and rephrased

them until I felt satisfied that they would lead to the answers to the problem. I then had to determine what type of study was best for the situation, so I choose a case study as the best option for my research. This was a learning experience for me, because before the research, I was unaware of the various types of research studies. Next, there were the different types of frameworks associated with research. After reading coursework texts on qualitative research, I decided to use the constructivist learning theory as the conceptual framework for my research.

The literature review was the most challenging aspect of the research. I gained insight into RTI and reading interventions and felt empowered by the information. Data collection was the highpoint of my research. I looked forward to interviewing the participants and gaining insight into their thoughts about the questions. It was most rewarding because I learned a lot about their perceptions.

I went into the study with the notion that the process would be seamless. I formed these preconceptions because I am involved with RTI as a focus group member. I also had to consider that the research questions were relevant to my involvement in RTI which may be a potential bias. I also considered that my bias and experiences may be related to the research study because I may want positive outcomes for the continuation of the program. My objective was to be fair and not impose any preconceived ideas on the participants.

Because I am familiar with the participants, they may have been inclined to be biased with their answers to the interview questions because they also may have wanted the program to be successful and continue. They did not hold back with their responses

and I was surprisingly pleased that they felt the need to be forthright about their experiences with RTI and what needs to be done for the program to be successful.

As a result of the study, I found out that students will engage in reading about what they are interested in. I also found out that students did not want to participate in the reading activities because they did not want their peers to know they struggled with reading. For them, perception was everything. This was surprising to me because the students I had encountered before I did the study kept asking why there was not a reading class and that they would be less frustrated if they could be in a small reading class. They saw the reading class as a form of supportive instruction. I was surprised at the outcome of the class after the data was analyzed. I was glad I did the study because there were several factors I did not consider with RTI and the reading class. However, after interviewing the participants, and triangulating the data, I have come to the conclusion that the reading class was not effective in improving students' reading.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this case study reveal that a reading class using RTI interventions was not successful in improving at-risk students reading. Students made minimal gains on reading probes but there were no significant gains. Most participants noted that student placement in study skills classes posed behavioral problems in the past; however, with the implementation of Instructional Focus, students are populated in the correct classes based on their areas of deficits.

The data analysis suggested that RTI's conceptualization varied among administrators and participants. Administrators' purpose for RTI shifted over the periods



they served. Originally, RTI focused on academic gains toward meeting AYP. For this school year, RTI has been changed to MTSS. Participants believed that since RTI has changed to MTSS in 2014, the focus has shifted more toward discipline and less on academics. Its emphasis is now on behavior as opposed to academics from the former RTI practices. This was supported by MTSS focus group meeting documents where teachers would be asked to mentor at-risk students with behavior referrals. MTSS's focus group believes that there needs to be proper documentation of at-risk students, and there needs to be better follow up procedures to keep track of these students. They believe the program is too scattered because special education and Tiers 1 -4 services overlap and there need to be some way to merge the services.

The data also suggested that computer-based programs were the preferred method for gauging students' reading progress despite the limited reading resources. Lastly, data also suggested that most students were not engaged in the class for reasons such as embarrassment, image and reputation, labeling, and denial that they had a reading problem. Based on the data, I have concluded that the reading class was not effective in improving students' reading where significant gains were made. Minimal gains were made, but overall, there needs to be more student interest, reading resources, and a structured reading curriculum based on RTI/MTSS interventions.

As a special education and collaborative teacher, I have seen students struggle with reading at all levels. I have taught 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade students and have observed that the struggle gets worse as the grade level increases. Students who experience reading difficulties often resort to deflective and avoidance behaviors such as disrupting the class,

sleeping , asking to go to the restroom, skipping, and refusing to read. Some of these students can call words but do not comprehend what they read. In essence, they cannot construct textual meaning. As a result, frustration steps in and then they are on a downward spiral to hopelessness. The final result is dropping out. I have witnessed this through the years and have seen several students drop out. My hope is that high schools implement reading classes as a MTSS intervention. I also hope that small class sizes would be considered, and the classes be taught by reading certified teachers who are skilled and knowledgeable about reading and differentiated strategies which includes utilizing updated technology that are interesting to students. Most of us teach how we were taught, but today's students are technology driven, therefore, learning has to be relevant to the times we live in. My passion for this research has been influenced by my observation of the struggles of high schools with reading difficulties and by those who have dropped out because they felt hopeless. Because of the futility some of these students experience, I hope that the school will continue the reading class and consider the recommendations made by the participants. Once these recommendations are considered and implemented, students with reading difficulties who struggle in content area reading across the curriculum may feel less disconsolate and thrive toward making gains in grade level reading that may be reflected in improved grades.

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## APPENDIX A: SCHOOL DISTRICT APPROVAL

Leadership Services

February 16, 2012

Dear Ms. Popwell:

Your request to conduct research in our school system as part of a requirement to obtain your **Ed.D in Educational Leadership** from Waldon University has been reviewed. Specifically, consideration was given to the description of your research project, proposed data collection procedures, instruments and research timeline.

It is my understanding that you plan to **determine whether there was an improvement in reading for students referred to a reading intervention class through the RTI process.** Please note that all information obtained for this study must be completely voluntary and anonymous. To preserve the confidentiality of student and staff information, pseudonyms for teachers, students, schools, and this system must be used in all written reports. It is understood that you will not have access to teacher or student data that will specifically identify an individual. This data must be used solely for the purpose articulated in the research application.

After considering all of the information submitted, it appears that your research request meets the requirements of ██████████ County Board of Education policy KEBA, Solicitation of Information. I am, therefore, approving your request to conduct the research in our school system as described in your proposal. You must identify the school(s) willing to participate and then work with the school principal(s) to schedule data collection for your study. I hope that your research project goes well and that the information you obtain will be beneficial to you and the students of ██████████ County Schools.

Sincerely,

██████████  
Superintendent

## Appendix B

### Letter of Cooperation

[REDACTED] High School  
[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

September 30, 2013

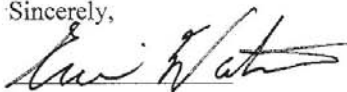
Dear Mrs. Ann-Marie Popwell,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled *The Effectiveness of Response to Intervention to Improve High School Students' Reading Skills within [REDACTED] High School*. As part of this study, I authorize you to recruit and interview staff members, collect students' work samples, RTI data team minutes, school documents related to RTI, and archival documents. I authorize you to use the school's facilities and resources for your research. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission from the Walden University IRB.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting.

Sincerely,



[REDACTED]  
Principal  
[REDACTED] High School

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] Fax

*"Ensuring Success for Each Student"*

**APPENDIX C: NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF HEALTH CERTIFICATE**

**Topic: Certificate Showing the Completion of the National Institute of Health Course on the Ethical and Humane Treatment of Participants during a Research Stud**



**APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANTS' INFORMED CONSENT**

**Title:** The Effectiveness of Response to Intervention to Improve High School Students' Reading Skills

**Researcher:** Ann-Marie Popwell, Doctoral Candidate  
Administrative Leadership for Teaching and Learning  
Walden University

**Faculty Advisor:** Dr. David Weintraub, Committee Chairperson  
The Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership  
Walden University

You are invited to take part in a research study to examine the effectiveness of Response to Intervention in improving reading skills for high school students. This study is being conducted by a researcher named Ann-Marie Popwell who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You may already know the researcher as a teacher, but this study is separate from that role. At the research site, some students who have difficulty with reading are given the opportunity to remedy the situation through a reading class. Some students embrace the opportunity, while others may not. My aim is to find out what role RTI played in improving students' reading from the perspectives of the participants. I am inviting teachers, administrators, graduation coach, counselor, and the school's RTI focus group to be in the study. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to participate.

**Background Information:**

Some students at this school are reading below grade level. These students usually have difficulty understanding content area text material and are at risk of falling behind. RTI intervention may be effective in improving reading skills through a reading class designed to help these students with reading difficulties attain reading strategies that will help them make gains toward higher achievement.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-time 45-60 minute audio taped in-depth semi-structured interview over the phone at a date and time that is convenient to you. Some sample questions are:

- How does the school's RTI model meet the needs of at-risk students with reading difficulties?
- Is high school reading classes effective in improving at risk students' reading?
- Could the RTI tier model help improve the reading program?

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation is voluntary, and you will not receive monetary compensation for your time. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at the research site will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as work-related stress, fatigue after school, and family commitment. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing. The potential benefits to this study would be that information in this research will be used to help at-risk students make gains in their coursework, thus increasing their chances of being successful. Next, the information will assist the school in identifying existing instructional weaknesses in the RTI reading class. Additionally, this study would be beneficial to schools, especially those who are in the initial stages of implementing RTI reading class.

**Privacy:**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by being placed in a sealed envelope and stored in a secured file cabinet in the researcher's home until the researcher is ready to begin the data analysis portion of the study. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact me via phone at xxx-xxx-xxxx or in person at the research site. You may also

contact my doctoral committee chairperson, Dr. David Weintraub at david.weintraub@waldenu.edu.

If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 800-925-3368, ext. 3121210 or irb@waldenu.edu . Walden University approval number for this study is **IRB will enter approval number here** and it expires on **IRB will enter expiration date.** You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

### **Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant

Date of consent

Participant's Signature

Researcher's Signature

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**APPENDIX E: TEACHER INFORMED CONSENT**

<b>Title:</b>	The Effectiveness of Response to Intervention to Improve High School Students' Reading Skills
<b>Researcher:</b>	Ann-Marie Popwell, Doctoral Candidate Administrative Leadership for Teaching and Learning Walden University
<b>Faculty Advisor:</b>	Dr. David Weintraub, Committee Chairperson The Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership Walden University

You are invited to take part in a research study to examine the effectiveness of Response to Intervention in improving reading skills for high school students. This study is being conducted by a researcher named Ann-Marie Popwell who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You may already know the researcher as a teacher, but this study is separate from that role. At the research site, some students who have difficulty with reading are given the opportunity to remedy the situation through a reading class. Some students embrace the opportunity, while others may not. My aim is to find out what role RTI played in improving students' reading from the perspectives of the participants. I am inviting teachers to be in the study, and teachers who will provide students' work samples and school documents. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to participate.

**Background Information:**

Some students at this school are reading below grade level. These students usually have difficulty understanding content area text material and are at risk of falling behind. RTI intervention may be effective in improving reading skills through a reading class designed to help these students with reading difficulties attain reading strategies that will help them make gains toward higher achievement.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-time 45-60 minute audio taped in-depth semi-structured interview over the phone at a date and time that is convenient to you. Some sample questions are:

- How does the school's RTI model meet the needs of at-risk students with reading difficulties?
- Is high school reading classes effective in improving at risk students' reading?
- Could the RTI tier model help improve the reading program?

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation is voluntary, and you will not receive monetary compensation for your time. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at the research site will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as work-related stress, fatigue after school, and family commitment. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing. The potential benefits to this study would be that information in this research will be used to help at-risk students make gains in their coursework, thus increasing their chances of being successful. Next, the information will assist the school in identifying existing instructional weaknesses in the RTI reading class. Additionally, this study would be beneficial to schools, especially those who are in the initial stages of implementing RTI reading class.

**Privacy:**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by being placed in a sealed envelope and stored in



a secured file cabinet in the researcher’s home until the researcher is ready to begin the data analysis portion of the study. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact me via phone at xxx-xxx-xxxx or in person at the research site. You may also contact my doctoral committee chairperson, Dr. David Weintraub at david.weintraub@waldenu.edu.

If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 800-925-3368, ext. 3121210 or irb@waldenu.edu . Walden University approval number for this study is **IRB will enter approval number here** and it expires on **IRB will enter expiration date.** You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

**Statement of Consent**

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Teacher

\_\_\_\_\_

Date of consent

\_\_\_\_\_

Teacher’s Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher’s Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX F: ADMINISTRATOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Tell me about your current position and how long you have worked at this school.
2. How have you been responsible for the implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) at your school?
3. How do you believe RTI tier model is helping teachers and students?
4. Why did the school implement RTI?
5. Describe the RTI process at your school.
6. Please give me details of the RTI training in your school?
7. In your opinion, how do teachers support the RTI model?
8. Name one success that you have discovered while implementing RTI reading classes in your school.
9. Name one challenge that you face with RTI reading classes in your school.
10. How do you evaluate the RTI reading class results?
11. How will you know whether it's RTI (as compared to another variable) that is responsible for students' success in reading?
12. What would you do to improve RTI at your school if money and authority were no option?
13. Is there anything else about RTI and the reading intervention class we have not talked about that you think I should know?

**APPENDIX G: TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What is your current position and how long you have worked at this school site?
2. In your own words, what is the goal of RTI at your school?
3. How knowledgeable are you about RTI and reading intervention? Explain.
4. What are your expectations for the reading class that uses the RTI approach?
5. How does the school's RTI model meet the needs of at-risk students?
6. What resources are in place to facilitate the use of RTI in your reading classes?
7. Describe how students' progress is monitored?
8. What are some formative assessments used to gauge students' progress?
9. What summative assessments are used to assess students' progress?
10. What reading methods do you find to be the most beneficial?
11. What level of success is derived from direct teaching instruction?
12. What level of success is derived from computer assisted instruction?
13. What level of success is derived from independent reading?
14. Name one challenge that you have discovered with the reading class?
15. What were some students' challenges with the reading class?
16. What reading resources were most challenging for the students with reading difficulties?
17. Is there anything else about RTI and the reading intervention class we have not talked about that you think I should know?

**APPENDIX H: PARTICIPANTS' INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. What is your current position and how long you have worked at this school site?
2. How are you involved with Response to Intervention (RTI)?
3. In your own words, what is the goal of RTI at your school?
4. How does the school's RTI model meet the needs of at-risk students?
5. How does the school's RTI model meet the needs of at-risk students with reading difficulties?
6. How is the progress of at-risk students monitored in the RTI model at this school?
7. Name one success that you have discovered with the implementation of the RTI reading class?
8. Name one success that the school has discovered since implementing RTI?
9. Name one success that the school has discovered since implementing the RTI reading class?
10. Name one challenge that the school has faced since implementing RTI and the reading class?
11. Who provides the teachers and other staff members with RTI training?
12. How has the schools' leadership contributed to the RTI program?
13. Do you think they could contribute more? If so, how?
14. Do you believe that most teachers support the use of RTI in reading classes?

Please explain.

15. What do you think should be done to make RTI and the reading class more successful here?
16. What methods or tools does the school use to evaluate the success of the RTI model?
17. Is there anything else about RTI we have not talked about that you think I should know?

## **APPENDIX I: CODING**

### **Categories and Codes Based on Interview Questions.**

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***Research Question 1 (RQ1). How do teachers conceptualize RTI? CODE: R=Reading***

RQ1. R G (Reading Goal)

RQ1. R P (Reading Progress)

RQ1. R T (Reading Training)

RQ1. R R (Reading Resources)

RQ1. R I (Reading Improvement)

RQ1. R S (Reading Satisfaction)

***Research Question 2 (RQ2). How does the RTI team conceptualize the reading class?***

RQ2. AP (Academic Performance)

RQ2. SP (Student Progress)

RQ2. FA (Formative Assessment)

RQ2. SA (Summative Assessment)

RQ2. RP (Reading Progress)

RQ2. SD (Student Difficulty)

RQ2. PM (Progress Monitoring)

***Research Question 3 (RQ3). What have been the benefits/challenges of the reading class?***

RQ3. RS (Reading Success methods)

RQ3. TI (Teacher Instruction)

RQ3. CI (Computer-based Instruction)

RQ3. IR (Independent Reading)

RQ3. RC (Reading Challenges)

RQ3. RR (Reading Resources)

RQ3. AR (Adequate Resources)

RQ3. PR (Preferred Resources)

RQ3. PI (Performance Increase)

**APPENDIX J: SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT****How does the school's RTI model meet the needs of at-risk students?**

T2: I don't feel we are doing it. We are setting up a mentoring program and we want to do more evaluations.

T3: By successfully locating these students through initial teacher referrals and having SST meetings.

T4: They were put in study skills classes. Being grouped in study skills does not meet the needs. They need to be separated from study skills to gauge the various levels of their needs.

T5: Through intervention at Tier 2 level, teacher referrals, and monitoring students progress every 9 weeks.

**Please give me details of the RTI training in your school?**

P2: Professional development; Information the MTSS committee discusses at the monthly meetings are disseminated throughout the school via emails and through the departments.

**Are high schools reading classes effective in improving at risk students' reading?**

A1: We thought it was. We had reading class in some students schedule for the first implementation of the reading class but it was difficult to keep up with; but now with IF we are able to better schedule students, so it might be effective.

A2: Yes; if they are implemented properly. It should have consistency and relevancy to the students.



**APPENDIX K: SAMPLE REFLECTIVE JOURNAL**

## Reflective Journal

10/31/13: Today I got IRB approval to begin my study. I am so elated! My wait for this moment seemed like an eternity and now it feels like Christmas in October! Now that I've gotten approval, I can proceed to collect my data.

11/ 7/ 13: I met with the first reading teacher in the morning on her planning period to notify her that I got approval to collect data on students' work. She informed me that she had cleaned out her file cabinet and had disposed of most of the work samples since she was no longer teaching the class but she will check to see if she still had any. I felt disappointed. We discussed a time when we would have the phone interview and after looking at her calendar, she was free to do it on the Friday before Thanksgiving break.

I met with the second reading teacher in the afternoon after school to let her know that I would like to collect whatever students' work samples that she has, and that I would like her to obscure any identifiable information that would identify who the students are. She said she has some samples and she would need time to collect and de-identify the students, so getting them to me after the holiday break would be more practical for her. I agreed. I told her I was interviewing the former reading teacher (T2) Friday before the break and she agreed that it was also a good day for her, so we set a time for it to be done.

11/8/13: I'm on a roll! Since I met with 2 participants, I might as well get the others to commit to a day and time for the interviews. Fridays are mostly good days for everyone

since we don't have school the next day and we are more relaxed to talk without inhibition. I contacted the other participants during the course of the day and was able to secure the interviews. Mission accomplished!

11/15/13: I have 2 interviews scheduled today after school- T1 and A2. I reminded them of the time and they assured me that it was still as planned. The interviews went very smoothly. T1 answered all the questions without hesitation. She is extremely knowledgeable about RTI and I value her input. She has over twenty years teaching experience and has been at the school for eighteen years. She sends out RTI progress reports and student failure list every 9 weeks via email to the faculty. She is walking data. She opposes the dismantling of the 9<sup>th</sup> grade teams who helped track students' need for intervention. She believes there are not enough reading classes and wants more teachers to be reading certified. A2 has worked at the school for ten years and has thirteen years teaching experience. A2 is new to RTI. He was deliberate with his answers making sure they were politically correct. He was transparent with his responses regarding keeping the students out of trouble. He is an advocate for mentoring which he believes is the first step in gaining students' trust. Once it is gained, they will listen and the transition to RTI academic interventions would be smoother.

11/16/13: My interviews today with T2 and T5 are on schedule. T2 works closely with T1 so I am looking forward to hear what's on her mind. When I contacted her, she had a situation to attend to, but she said she would still do the interview, only that it may be within a shorter time frame. I told her it was no problem since she did not want to

reschedule. Just like T1, she is a walking encyclopedia on RTI/ MTSS. She has over twenty years of teaching experience and has been at the school over 15 years. She has been involved in RTI since the implementation so she has seen the ups and downs of it. She believes that RTI is not meeting the needs of at-risk students so the new MTSS focus team is setting up teacher/student mentoring which should meet the needs at hand. She uses Key Train regularly and vouches for its success. The interview lasted approximately 30 minutes which was within her time frame.

## Curriculum Vitae

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Education: Walden University, Minneapolis, MN, 2007- present  
Doctor of Education candidate  
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Walden University, Minneapolis, MN, 2004- 2006  
Master of the Arts in Curriculum and Instruction

Mercer University, McDonough, GA, 2004  
Bachelor of Science in Social Services

Professional Experience: xxxxxxxxxxxx School System,  
High School Special Education Teacher 2002 – present  
Career & Technical Instruction Coordinator – 4 years

Professional Duties: CTI Leadership Team Member – 4 years  
Served as RTI Team Member – 2 years  
High School Ladies Club Advisor – 2 years

Memberships: Georgia Association of Educators  
xxxxx County Interagency Transition Planning Council