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# Elementary Teachers' Perceptions of Response to Intervention and Classroom Instruction

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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2015

Abstract

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MEd, Concordia University, 2002

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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## Abstract

Response to intervention (RTI) is a federal program created to improve student learning and reduce the number of students misidentified as needing special education services. Differing interpretations of how best to implement RTI between campuses and districts have resulted in teachers' confusion and misperceptions of the program. The purpose of this study was to understand how elementary classroom teachers' perceptions of RTI affect classroom instruction. Based on Gagne's instructional theory and Bruner's theory of constructivism, the study examined the perceptions of 10 classroom teachers in 2 low socio-economic elementary schools. The study examined how RTI forms and protocols, administrative leadership, and professional development impacted participants' perceptions of RTI and their classroom instructional practices. Data collected from group and individual interviews were transcribed and coded using open and axial coding to create categories. Participants' progress monitoring logs and the researcher's field notes corroborated interview results. Findings showed that teachers' limited knowledge of RTI resulted in frustration or indifference and that erudite administrative leadership and professional development are needed to improve classroom implementation. A district-wide, digital professional development plan based on the study's findings was recommended to improve educators' and administrators' understandings of the RTI program. Results add to the limited body of qualitative research exploring teachers' perceptions of RTI. Implications could improve teachers' and administrators' understandings and perceptions, foster collaboration leading to social change, and ultimately improve student learning.

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Section 1: The Problem

## Introduction

Response to intervention (RTI) is a nationally recognized educational reform effort designed to improve teaching and learning in all U.S. schools (Wixson, 2011). Teachers play a key role in effectively implementing the RTI process by providing high quality core classroom instruction that integrates research-based curricula (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). Understanding how teachers perceive the RTI process as it relates to classroom instruction will help educators and school administrators better understand the implementation strengths and challenges that impact student learning.

RTI is often attributed to having been introduced in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) act for general education students or in the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004) for special education students. However, the term RTI does not appear in either piece of legislation. Instead, this multitiered intervention framework evolved from the need for scientifically based research emphasized in both general education and special education acts (Sugai & Horner, 2009). The NCLB act uses the term scientifically based research over 100 times to ensure that "all children [will] learn on grade level and be assessed accordingly" (as cited in Daves & Walker, 2012, p. 69). While IDEA also uses scientifically based research, the terms scientific-based reading and scientifically based literacy instruction are also cited as necessary for or the basis of teaching interventions for individuals with specific learning disabilities (SLDs; Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002). Therefore, RTI is intended to improve learning for all students, both in the general education

classroom and by providing individuals with additional needed interventions (Federal Education Budget Project, 2014). When implemented correctly and with integrity, RTI also has the potential to expedite the early identification of students with SLDs (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2013). As such, RTI must support and be supported by both general and special education departments, requiring ongoing communication and collaboration at federal, state, and local levels.

According to NCLB (2001), all general and special education students in Grades 3-8 who attend public schools must be assessed every year in reading and math and are required to demonstrate mastery of grade level knowledge and skills as determined by state education agencies (DePry & Cheesman, 2010). Additionally, students' scores are expected to improve every year according to a predetermined annual yearly rate of progress (AYP) also set by the state (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Because some students lack experiential opportunities or background knowledge and have a higher risk of failing, test scores are disaggregated and weighted differently according to subpopulations including the following: English language learners (ELLs), children of poverty, students with SLDs, and minority students. State and federal funding are available to help schools that serve high populations of students identified as "at-risk" (Hall & Mahoney, 2013).

Between 2001 and 2005, following NCLB's mandate that all children be taught and assessed on grade level, the national percentage of students identified with SLDs increased from 4.4% to 5.2% (NCLD, 2013), with the majority of these students representing at-risk subgroups (Kozleski & Huber, 2010). Students with learning deficits

who were unable to meet annual AYP were presumed to have learning disabilities and were referred for special education testing. Reflecting the rising number of special education referrals, the number of students who were misidentified as needing special education services also increased (Daves & Walker, 2012). As the cost of providing special education services is 2-3 times higher than that of general education services (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012), lawmakers shifted their focus from students' deficits to the quality of instruction in the general education classroom (Wixson, 2011).

The term scientifically based practices appears frequently in both NCLB and IDEA and is defined by the U.S. Department of Education (2002) as "research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs" (slide 013). Additionally, NCLB specified that classroom teachers use systematic teaching methods and incorporate rigorous and ongoing data analyses to ensure student learning (as cited in Daves & Walker, 2012). While both acts indicate the need to help at-risk learners and emphasize the importance of scientifically based research, neither provides specific guidelines for how to implement these directives.

Although general guidelines for RTI implementation are recommended in IDEA (NCLD, 2013), school districts are charged with interpreting the RTI process and creating RTI infrastructures that reflect the unique academic and cultural needs of each district's student population (Daves & Walker, 2012). As districts scramble to understand and implement the RTI program, the wide variety of understanding and implementation protocols have resulted in much confusion (Hoover & Love, 2011). Districts must also

decide how to fund the RTI program. Written to support the needs of special education students, IDEA legislation recommends districts allocate up to 15% of special education funds to subsidize the RTI program (Carlson, Monk, Abernathy, Stephens, & Allen, 2011). However, as RTI is intended to support both general education students and special education students (Sugai & Horner, 2009), districts have a choice in deciding which department will fund and house the RTI program.

With limited and often conflicting understanding of how the RTI process works and with a myriad of options of how to create and fund local RTI infrastructures, school districts have responded to program implementation in a variety of ways. Led by state initiatives, some school districts have been successful in developing and implementing successful RTI programs (Florida Department of Education, 2013). However, many other school districts have either delegated RTI implementation to individual school campuses or created unstable infrastructures that are continually changing, resulting in widespread confusion (Cicek, 2012).

Teachers are the most important components of the RTI process (Fruge & Ward, 2011). As the primary implementers of NCLB's research-based practices, classroom teachers are expected to change from traditional teaching methods that focus on instruction to analyzing data to ensure that all students are successful (Hughes & Dexter, 2011). Rather than focusing on student deficits, teachers must now take responsibility for the success or failure of struggling students identifying and filling students' learning gaps (Sanger, Friedli, Brunken, Snow, & Ritzman, 2012). Instead of whole group teaching and unit tests, teachers use daily instructional practices such as small group differentiated

lessons and formative assessments to guide instruction.

Effective collaboration and communication between all stakeholders, knowledgeable administrators, and ongoing professional development are common factors that have positively impacted teachers' perceptions of RTI (Hoover & Love, 2011). School districts with successful RTI programs have been led by administrators who have been actively involved in establishing a framework for school-wide success (Hazelkorn, Bucholz, Goodman, Duffy, & Brady, 2011) and have provided ongoing professional development opportunities for all stakeholders (Hall & Mahoney, 2013). However, to initiate and sustain the necessary school-wide reform effort needed to successfully implement RTI, teachers and administrators must first have a clear understanding of the program and show fidelity to it (Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor, & Cardarelli, 2010). As such, a lack of understanding and inconsistent program fidelity is a central issue currently challenging many school districts (Hoover, 2011).

In 2006, the U.S. Department of Education published the final regulations that were initiated in the reauthorized 2004 IDEA Act (NCLB, 2013), and district committee members in a large southwestern suburban school district reviewed the national RTI guidelines and recommendations to decide how RTI would be implemented (Executive Director of Curriculum and Design, personal communication, July 3, 2013). As a primary goal of RTI is to decrease the number of special education referrals (Kozleski & Huber, 2010), and as the number of students identified with SLDs in XYZ School District had increased by 38% between 1991 and 2006 (LISD, 2012), the district's RTI committee decided that the preventative measures of RTI would benefit more students in

the general education classroom. Rather than allocating up to 15% of the district's special education funds as recommended in NCLB (2001), the committee chose to use stimulus funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment (ARRA) act and hired 10 educators to serve as RTI facilitators on the elementary campuses that had the highest number of SLD referrals and do-not-qualify (DNQ) rates. As RTI was a new program in the district, supported on 10 elementary campuses by new facilitators, understanding of RTI varied widely across the district (Executive Director Curriculum and Instruction, personal communication, July 3, 2013). The following year, ARRA funding was reallocated, and the responsibilities for RTI implementation, professional development, and campus protocols became the responsibility of campus administrators (Principal, personal communication, June 14, 2013).

In 2010, a $4 billion cut in the state's education budget eliminated approximately 25,000 school-level positions and support programs (Burnam, 2013). Like many school districts, XYZ district reduced and consolidated personnel on all levels. The RTI program was combined with literacy and dyslexia services within the curriculum department. Campus administrators followed suit and combined campus RTI with literacy support. Additional funding cuts compounded the problem by forcing campus administrators to eliminate most literacy positions (Principal, personal communication, June 14, 2013). As some campuses had literacy teachers and others did not, district administrators recommended that assistant principals (APs) be given the responsibility of overseeing the RTI process on their respective campuses and included an introductory RTI training within in-service for all new APs (Executive Director Curriculum and

Instruction, personal communication, July 3, 2013).

Currently in XYZ School District, some campuses have part time RTI facilitators while RTI is the responsibility of the APs on other campuses (Principal, personal communication, June 14, 2013). Professional development is the responsibility of campus administrators, who may or may not have attended initial RTI training provided by the district. As teacher fidelity, buy-in, and effective implementation of the RTI process is critical to the success of the program (Hazelkorn et al., 2011), and as successful implementation of the RTI program has proven to reduce the number of special education referrals (McDaniel, Albritton, & Roach, 2013), an increased understanding of how teachers perceive RTI could lead to improved program implementation and student learning.

## Rationale

Consistent, high-quality classroom instruction reduces the number of students needing supplemental support and possible referrals for special education testing (McDaniel et al., 2013). As the quality of classroom instruction is the most important factor in student learning, and as students not receiving adequate classroom instruction may be misidentified as needing additional support (Abbot & Wills, 2012), teachers' understandings of the overarching RTI process and their roles within it is crucial (Hall & Mahoney, 2013). Educators who do not understand the systematic checks and balances of the program are more likely to focus on student deficits, viewing the process as a way to document student failures until a special education referral is made (Greenfield et al., 2010).

In addition to classroom teachers' understanding, campus and district administrators must also be able to support the RTI process by setting clear procedural expectations, providing ongoing professional development, and holding teachers accountable to program fidelity to promote school-wide collaboration to improve student learning (Grimaldi & Robertson, 2011). Understanding and integrating the RTI process throughout the school requires campus administrators to hire highly qualified classroom teachers and expert support interventionists (Cooter & Perkins, 2011) and to provide ongoing professional development (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). RTI is a school-wide effort that starts in the classroom and is directed by administrator (Fuchs et al., 2012).

How school district personnel have interpreted and implemented the RTI process has varied widely across the United States, resulting in a mixture of successes and confusion (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). In XYZ School District, teachers' understanding of the RTI process varies from campus to campus as campus administrators shoulder the responsibility of establishing procedures, providing professional development, and ensuring program fidelity (Principal, personal communication, July 3, 2013). As multiple interpretations of the multitiered RTI framework can result in confusion and poor implementation (O'Connor & Witter Freeman, 2012), insight into teachers' perceptions of RTI as it relates to classroom instruction would benefit all stakeholders in the XYZ School District.

The purpose of this study was to investigate elementary classroom teachers' perceptions of the RTI process as it relates to classroom instruction. Study findings may give campus and district personnel insight into the effectiveness of the RTI process in

XYZ School District resulting in changes in professional development, administrative support, RTI procedures, or hiring processes. Future implications could include RTI studies that compare elementary, middle, and high school campuses or schools with differing socioeconomic or cultural demographics.

## Definition of Terms

*American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA)*: Legislation that was signed into law in 2009 to create and save U. S. jobs. Education programs included in this act are Race to the Top, Investing in Innovation, Teacher Incentive Fund, and Title I School Improvement Grants (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

*Assistant principal (AP)*: School administrators who support the campus principal. Aps are usually required to have a master's degree in education and prior teaching experience; APs have a wide variety of responsibilities including student discipline, campus scheduling, parent mediation, professional development, standardized testing, and instructional leadership (Colwell, 2015).

*At-risk students*: Students whose academic performance or limited life experiences indicate likelihood of poor learning outcomes if not provided with interventions to close learning gaps (National Center for Response to Intervention, 2014).

*Adequate yearly progress (AYP)*: A 5-step process to help states determine what all students should know and be able to (a) determine appropriate expectations for all students; (b) set a baseline to measure growth; (c) set specific incremental growth points to determine if all students are meeting state expectations reading and math, (d) measure annual growth rates of students, schools, and school districts; and (e) help students

succeed by developing and implementing accountability measures for schools that do not make AYP (Education Trust, Washington D.C., 2003).

*Core curriculum:* Mandatory knowledge and skills required for all general education students in a school district. Created, established, and maintained by state education agencies and local school boards, core curricula align with state standardized testing and are assessed every year (National Center on Response to Intervention [NCRTI], 2012).

*Differentiated instruction:* How educators adjust the content and process of what is being taught to create appropriate learning experiences that are tailored to students' academic, emotional, and cultural needs and strengths (NCRTI, 2014).

*Evidence-based instruction*: Educational practices and instructional strategies that are supported by scientific research targeting individual students' needs, such as direct instruction, small group targeted instruction, collaborative strategic reading, and communal teaching (Hoover & Love, 2011; NCRTI, 2014).

*Highly qualified teacher*: A teacher who (a) has earned state certification and passed the state teacher licensing exam, (b) holds a bachelor's degree, and (c) exhibits competence in the subject area taught (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2011).

*IStation*: A comprehensive online curriculum designed to support students' academic achievement in Grades K-8 by integrating systematic student assessments with interactive engaging activities. Intended as a supplemental a program, IStation provides educators with detailed reports on students' progress in reading and math (IStation,

2015).

*Progress monitoring:* A series of formative assessments used by educators to determine if students are benefitting from the current instructional intervention and whether the students' rate of progress is adequate and appropriate for the intervention (Hughes & Dexter, 2011).

*Research-based instruction:* Instruction using comprehensive programs that teachers may adjust to meet students' academic needs in the classroom (Hoover & Love, 2011).

*Response to intervention (RTI):* RTI is designed to provide "opportunities to succeed in school by providing responsive instruction and assessment and evidence-based interventions to support struggling students. Additionally, RTI can assist with the early detection and identification of learning disabilities and other disabilities" (NCRTI, 2014).

*Scientifically based research*: Research that supports the consistent use of instructional methods that have been proven effective and have produced verifiable results (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

*Specific learning disability (SLD)*: "A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written language that may affect a person's ability to listen, speak, read, write, spell, or perform mathematical calculations" (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

*Tier 1 Instruction*: Core curricula that is research-based and designed for the general education classroom (Hoover & Love, 2011).

*Tier 2 Interventions*: Supplemental instruction that targets struggling students'

specific learning deficits identified during Tier 1 instruction (Hoover & Love, 2011).

*Tier 3 Intervention:* Highly specialized instruction usually provided by an expert in the field that targets specific and significant academic or behavioral needs, including special education (Hoover & Love, 2011).

*Title 1*: A federal grant program that subsidizes schools serving a high number of students identified as at risk of failing state performance standards in reading, math, and writing due to socioeconomic, linguistic, or cultural deficits (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

*Universal screening:* An initial stage within a screening process that helps identify students who may be at risk of poor learning outcomes. Universal screening tests are typically conducted three times per year with all students at a grade level (NCRTI, 2012).

## Significance of the Study

Some teachers feel they lack the necessary skills to effectively implement the RTI process (Carlson et al., 2011). Therefore, understanding how teachers' perceptions of RTI impact classroom instruction is a first step towards clarifying teachers' roles within the RTI framework. By gaining insight into classroom teachers' perceptions of the RTI process, district and campus administrators may better understand current RTI procedures in the XYZ School District, allowing them to address inconsistencies, support effective classroom instruction, and reduce special education referrals (Kozleski & Huber, 2010). Study findings may also encourage teachers and administrators to see themselves as agents of change, resulting in eventual school and district-wide reform (Hall & Mahoney,

2013).

While many studies have been conducted on the topic of RTI, most have been quantitative in nature (Orosco & Klingner, 2010). Contrary to the deductive methods used in quantitative research to collect, measure, and statistically analyze data, qualitative methods are used to inductively explore human behavior from participants' perspectives (Yin, 2014). As teachers play key roles in the RTI process (DePry & Cheesman, 2010), and as there are few studies on teachers' perceptions of RTI (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009), there is a need for additional qualitative research to better understand teachers' perceptions and attitudes of RTI (Castro-Villarreal, Rodriguez, & Moore, 2014).

## Research Questions

Gaining insight into elementary classroom teachers' perceptions of RTI could benefit the XYZ School District by providing campus and district administrators insight into the strengths and limitations of teachers' core classroom instruction as they relate to the RTI process. To better understand how teachers perceive the RTI program, the following overarching questions guided this project study:

1. How do elementary classroom teachers perceive the RTI process affecting core-classroom instruction?
2. How are teachers' perceptions of RTI influenced by professional development?
3. How are teachers' perceptions of RTI influenced by administrative expectations and ongoing support?

4. What do teachers perceive to be the benefits or challenges of implementing the RTI process?

## Review of the Literature

The review of literature was used to establish the foundation for this project study by identifying and connecting the broader problem of teachers' perspectives affecting core classroom instruction to the local problem in XYZ School District. After establishing the study's theoretical framework, I show how RTI is connected to special education and how effective, scientifically based instruction in the classroom is integral to the success of the RTI process. I next present the overarching RTI framework as a continuum comprised of three tiers of instructional intensity and explain the role of the RTI committee as it relates to classroom instruction. In reviewing research on ongoing professional development (PD) as a critical factor in teachers' understanding of RTI, I then show how teachers' perceptions of the RTI process are integral to effective core classroom instruction and discuss challenges in program implementation (Bruner, 1966) that result in teachers' misperceptions and lack of fidelity.

Prior to submitting the project study for university research reviewer (URR) and institutional review board (IRB) approval, I conducted an exhaustive search of current literature using peer-reviewed journals accessed through Walden University's databases: Education Research Complete, SAGE©, EBSCO©, ERIC©, Thoreau, and Google© scholar. I also explored more than 25 websites including U.S. Department of Education, National Center on Response to Intervention, National Center for Learning Disabilities, National Center for Education Statistics, and RTI Action Network to conduct a Boolean

search with the following keywords: *response to intervention*, *RTI*, *elementary teachers' perceptions*, *IDEA*, *tiered instruction*, and *special education*.

**Conceptual Framework**

RTI is a "comprehensive, systemic approach to teaching and learning that addresses learning problems for all students through differentiated assessment and instruction" (Wixson, 2011, p. 503). According to Depry and Cheesman (2010), educators are the primary agents of change in a classroom, combining core classroom instruction (e.g., lesson planning, guided and independent practice activities, ongoing formative assessments, and summative evaluation) with differentiated instruction for needs-based learning (e.g., collaboration, active learning). Teachers' expertise and research-based classroom practices are key factors in effectively implementing RTI in core classroom instruction (Harlacher, Nelson Walker, & Sanford, 2010), while targeted, student-centered learning supports the needs-based instruction necessary for Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. As I explored how teachers' perceptions of RTI affect classroom instruction, two relevant theories were used to create a foundational framework for the study: Gagne's (1965) instructional design theory (1965) and Bruner's (1966) theory of constructivism. In the behaviorist approach to instructional theory, Gagne addressed cognitive learning in core classroom instruction, while, in the constructivist approach, Bruner focused on the learner-centered, differentiated learning experiences of evidence-based interventions.

Instructional theory is a rigid set of principles based on intentional learning goals that educators use to assure that learning takes place (Cooney, Cross, & Trunk, 1993).

Rooted in behaviorism, instructional theory is based on the belief that it is the educator's responsibility to manipulate learning conditions to attain the student's established learning goals. Accordingly, a student with high aptitude would receive different instruction from a student with low aptitude. Gagne (1965) facilitated learning by focusing on students' intellectual skills and sequences learning from simple to more complex skills. Gagne's (1984) theory includes nine "events of instruction" that represent nine cognitive processes: (a) gain students' attention, (b) inform students of learning objective, (c) connect to students' prior learning or background knowledge, (d) present the information or teach content, (e) provide guided practice, (f) formatively assess student learning through students' performance such as portfolios, (g) provide feedback, (h) provide summative assessment of student learning, and (i) reflect on learning. Gagne (1964, 1984) provided instructional designers with a clear template that provides focused and efficient instruction.

Daily lesson plan designs in classrooms reflect Gagne's (1984) conditions of learning theory. Using intentional learning goals, teachers respond to the academic needs of students by manipulating classroom learning conditions and using the necessary steps of Gagne's nine events of instruction to facilitate learning. This is the essence of Tier 1 classroom instruction in the RTI process. Rather than waiting for a child to fail, the RTI process supports academic and behavioral teaching strategies through validating the effectiveness of teaching, identifying at-risk students, allowing teachers to set individual goals and provide formative progress, supporting student growth with data, and tracking progress over time (Cicek, 2012). According to Fuchs et al. (2012), an effective teaching

cycle is "a well understood method for designing and delivering instruction, allowing teachers to embed cultural responsiveness where needed" (p. 268). Scaffolding on a familiar process such as the teaching cycle is a critical factor in teachers' perceptions of RTI. When implementing a new learning initiative such as RTI that requires a significant shift in teacher practice, it is critical to empower teachers by scaffolding on known context (Pyle, Wade-Wolley, & Hutchinson, 2011).

In the conditions of learning theory, Gagne (1965) correlated students' learning outcomes to the type of instruction provided by the teacher. Aligning with the systematic, empirical instruction presented in federal legislation (U.S. Department of Education, 2001), this theory supports the instructional responsibilities of the classroom teacher in the general education classroom. Gagne also theorized that any change in the sequence, addition, or omission of instructional steps should respond to the intellectual needs of the students. Similar to Gagne's theory, in the constructivist theory, Bruner (1966) also emphasized the importance of students' cognitive processes. However, Bruner theorized that a complex, holistic, and learner-centered environment is more beneficial to student learning.

Unlike instructional theory where the instructor systematically moves towards pre-established instructional goals, constructivist teachers act as facilitators, creating classroom environments where students work together to problem solve authentic, real-world situations (Instructionaldesign, 2013). Bruner (1966) viewed learning is an active process, and learners use their schema, or prior knowledge, to construct new ideas. Constructivist teachers facilitate learning by using strategies such as Socratic dialogue to

build knowledge. This style of teaching is an important component of RTI, as questioning, authentic activities, and real-world experiences establishes a foundation in which students begin to make connections between past and future learning (Fuchs et al., 2012). Expert teachers know how to create and deliver lessons that respond to students' learning needs by integrating students' background knowledge and previous learning with new concepts. Experiential activities such as experiments, project-based learning, field trips, and role playing provide students with foundational knowledge and skills on which to scaffold new learning. While Gagne's (1984) nine events of learning provide teachers with a systematic teaching framework, Bruner's experiential activities are more learner-centered, resulting in balanced classroom instruction.

While blending Gagne's (1965, 1984) empirical classroom instruction with Bruner's (1966) constructing knowledge to fill in the gaps helps educators implement the multitiered RTI program, teachers must understand the need to shift their thinking from traditional teaching methods to RTI's leveled components (Hoover, 2011). This requires making teachers aware of the purpose of RTI as it relates to its root in special education. By understanding the scope of RTI, educators can understand how their roles in the overarching framework connect to each other and to the needs of the students.

**Response to Intervention and Special Education**

RTI has been given the misnomer "The Road to Special Education" as it is misunderstood to be a supplemental precursor to special education testing (Allington, 2009; Wixson, 2011). Although RTI does precede special education testing, its purpose is not to lengthen the referral process, but to reduce the number of referrals by identifying

struggling students' academic deficits early and by providing targeted instruction to close achievement gaps (Cicek, 2012).

To better understand the relationship between RTI and special education, it is necessary to examine the SLD identification process. IDEA (2004) regulations require that states adopt criteria for determining whether students have an SLD that is consistent with federal criteria. Additionally, states must permit the use of a process that shows students' response to scientific, research-based intervention (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The IQ discrepancy model has been the traditional and most widely used method used to determine if students have SLDs (Pyle et al., 2011). Administered by an educational assessment specialist, the results from these batteries of tests determine if there is a significant gap, or discrepancy, between a student's score on an IQ test and his or her ability to perform on grade level as defined by the state education agency (Daves & Walker, 2012). Consequently, the IQ discrepancy model has been called the "waiting-to-fail" method, requiring educators to focus on students' deficits and allowing them to fail until the predetermined "wide enough" gap between intelligence and ability appears.

A disproportionate number of low-income students and English language learners (ELLs) have been misidentified as having SLDs by the IQ discrepancy model (Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Wixson, 2011). The RTI process provides a series of evidenced-based strategies to screen students while they are still within the general curricula. Through early identification and appropriate instructional strategies that target specific areas of deficit, fewer students will have wide enough achievement gaps, resulting in fewer

special education referrals. (Fuchs et al., 2012). As researchers have shown that students who are 2 years behind in reading at the end of first grade are unlikely to ever catch up to grade-level proficiency (Cicek, 2012), early identification and intervention are critical components of the RTI process in ensuring students' academic success.

Understanding the relationship between RTI and special education is important for effective implementation. Educators who do not have a clear understanding of the RTI process are more likely to focus on students' deficits, document failures, and wait for help (Greenfield et al., 2010). To begin to understand the RTI process, it is important to first understand the program's multitiered framework.

**Three Tiers of Instructional Intensity**

The RTI process requires educators to measure how students respond to core classroom instruction and, when necessary, provide a continuum of additional and increasingly intensive interventions to promote grade-level achievement (Cicek, 2012). Figure 1 presents the pyramid of RTI support.

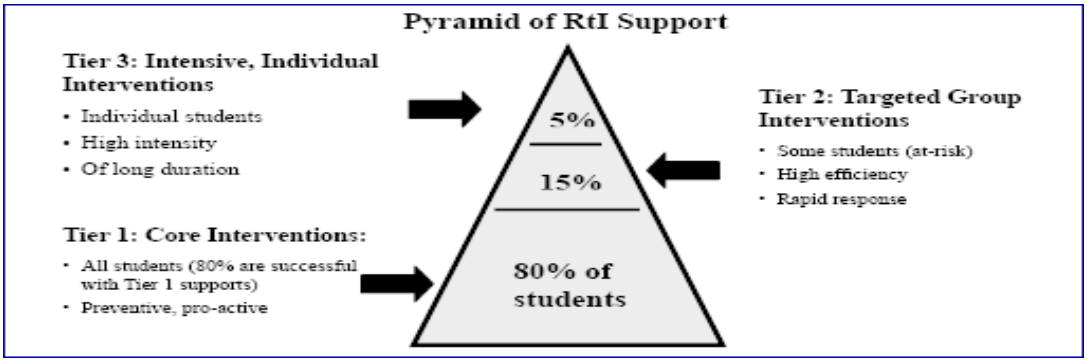


*Figure 1.* RTI framework of multitiered instructional support

As seen in Figure 1, the RTI process is represented in a triangular framework made up of three levels, or tiers. Each tier represents a level of instruction, beginning with primary prevention on Tier 1. Teachers who understand the RTI process are aware of the varying levels of support provided on each tier and of the necessity to screen students, develop instruction, monitor progress, and make informed decisions on each level (Daves & Walker, 2012). Students who are screened and identified as needing additional academic or behavioral support move up the framework to receive additional, more intensive support that targets specific gaps in learning. If supplemental support is successful, students demonstrate mastery of targeted concepts and move back down the framework to a lower tier. Students who do not improve with additional targeted support move up to a higher tier (Fuchs et al., 2012). How students respond to each tier of intervention is the premise on which RTI is founded and why it is called RTI.

**Tier 1.** Tier 1 is the foundational level of the RTI continuum and refers to mainstream or core classroom instruction (Hoover & Love, 2011). As the primary agents of change, classroom teachers must integrate the essential knowledge and skills required by state standards with students' background knowledge. Understanding best practices is essential in Tier 1, as teachers must differentiate instruction through shared, guided, and independent activities to create an active learning environment (Hughes & Dexter, 2011). Curriculum in this tier is primarily research-based, using district-purchased resources that align with state program standards (Jenkins et al., 2013). Most school districts purchase research-based curricula from commercial publishers, relying on the publisher-recommended, criterion-based assessments to screen and evaluate students'

achievement levels. These universal screenings are given to students at the beginning, middle, and end of the academic year and come with pre-established cut-scores, or targeted proficiency levels, below which students are considered "at-risk."

There are two aspects of Tier 1 in the RTI process. The first refers to the general population of students within the classroom environment (See Figure 1). All students (high-risk, low or no-risk, ELLs, and special education students) receive daily Tier 1 instruction. According to RTI standards, approximately 80% of students in a classroom are successful on this primary tier (NCRTI, 2012). Students who are unable to perform on grade level despite quality Tier 1 instruction are identified through research-based universal screenings, formative assessments, and observations and are placed on Tier 1 by the classroom teachers (Rinaldi, Higgins Averill, & Stuart, 2011). Once a student is identified at-risk and is placed on Tier 1, the classroom teacher must determine the specific academic knowledge or skills the student lacks that has resulted in a gap in learning. A critical factor of effective RTI implementation is to prove that gaps in learning are the result of students' deficits and not poor instruction (Fuchs et al., 2012). Therefore, it is crucial that classroom teachers provide high quality, systematic classroom instruction that includes differentiation and that they document their instructional strategies showing best practices in a learner-centered classroom.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2013), ELLs are the fastest growing population of students in the United States. There is a misalignment of instruction, inadequate teacher preparation, limited resources, and a negative school culture when addressing the learning needs of ELLs (Orosco & Klingner, 2010), resulting

in an increased number of inappropriate referrals to special education. As ELLs often score below universal screening cut scores due to language deficits, classroom teachers must be able to make appropriate linguistic accommodations when necessary to correctly assess students' learning. Additionally, teachers must include best practices that support second language learning in daily classroom instruction.

**Tier 2.** Tier 2 is the second level of intervention on the RTI continuum and is intended to fill specific achievement gaps of identified students using additional short-term instruction with increased intensity (Allington, 2009). Provided in addition to Tier 1 classroom instruction by the classroom teacher and specialized support staff, Tier 2 instruction is referred to as an intervention (Abbot & Wills, 2012) and is intended for approximately 15% of the student population (see Figure 1). The educators with special training who collaborate with the classroom teachers at this level are often referred to as interventionists (McDaniel et al., 2013) and may include speech and language pathologists, counselors, special education teachers, and literacy specialists.

Curricula used for Tier 2 interventions are evidence-based and rely on empirically validated research such as proven tutoring programs (NCRTI, 2012). In successful RTI programs, classroom teachers and support specialists collaborate to "double dip" struggling students (Abbot & Wills, 2012). While classroom teachers continue to provide research-based Tier 1 instruction in the classroom, interventionists use evidence-based curricula to provide additional instruction that targets students' specific gaps in learning. This additional layer of instruction requires increasing students' amount of time and practice on a subject using small group instruction (Fuchs et al., 2012).

According to the NCRTI (2012), effective Tier 2 instruction requires additional instruction to be given 20-45 minutes per day, 3-4 times per week, for 10-20 weeks. Classroom teachers who do not understand the supplemental nature of the RTI process expect interventionists to provide Tier 1 instruction. This misunderstanding results in struggling students receiving the same amount of Tier 1 instruction, but from a different teacher (Greenfield et al., 2010).

During Tier 2 interventions, educators and interventionists are responsible for documenting students' progress through pre and postassessments, anecdotal records, formative assessments, and student work samples (Abbot & Wills, 2012). With multiple educators simultaneously teaching different skills to different students at different levels, many learners respond to Tier 2 support and return to Tier 1. Students who do not improve despite both high quality Tier 1 instruction and simultaneous Tier 2 targeted support continue up the RTI continuum to Tier 3.

**Tier 3.** Tier 3 instructional interventionists provide struggling students with the most intensive level of support in the RTI continuum (Mellard, McKnight, & Woods, 2009). Intended for approximately 5% of the student population (see Figure 1), Tier 3 is the last defense before special education referrals. Like Tier 2, Tier 3 instruction is supplemental to daily classroom instruction. However, the amount of time for supplemental targeted instruction increases to 20-45 minutes per day, 4-5 times per week, over a period of 10-20 weeks. An example of an evidence-based Tier 3 intervention is the Reading Recovery Program (2013). This evidence-based tutorial program requires that highly qualified teachers take 12 hours of master's-level training to earn reading

recovery (RR) certification. Ranked by *What Works Clearinghouse* (2014) as the most effective intervention program of 26 programs, the RR program shows evidence of positive effects on student reading outcomes with teachers working one-on-one with struggling first grade students 30 minutes per day for 20 weeks. As RTI interventionists, RR teachers monitor individual student's progress by giving and analyzing daily running records and adjusting instruction accordingly. Students who demonstrate grade-level reading proficiency at the end of 20 weeks move down two tiers on the RTI continuum to continue Tier 1 classroom instruction. On the contrary, students who fail to perform on grade level despite receiving core and supplemental instruction provided by highly qualified professionals are referred back to the campus RTI committee. Based on the data provided by all educators representing primary, secondary, and tertiary support, the RTI committee may recommend special education testing. As 90 to 95% of all learners are expected to improve when given high quality Tier 1 instruction and targeted Tier 2 support, those requiring Tier 3 support warrant close scrutiny and are candidates for special education referrals (Hoover & Love, 2011).

**Administrator and Response to Intervention Committee Support**

The most important factor affecting the success of any change effort is the quality of leadership (Fullan, 2010). While classroom teachers are the primary providers of RTI process (Fruge & Ward, 2011; Wixson, 2011), campus principals are the instructional leaders of the school and so must lead in the development and implementation of campus RTI procedures (Cicek, 2012). By setting clear expectations and providing ongoing training and support, principals can promote collaboration and communication to ensure

the successful implementation of RTI (Greenfield et al., 2010). However, for data-driven processes such as RTI, campus administrators must develop and sustain a systematic process that continually monitors students' progress and assesses campus RTI objectives and goals (O'Connor & Witter Freeman, 2012). A lack of administrative understanding may result in inadequate tiered instruction, create false levels of progress, and create confusion, resulting in limited or ineffective RTI implementation (Hoover & Love, 2011). Therefore, fidelity to implementations must be consistent on every level for RTI to be successful (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012).

Effective RTI models require the coordination and support of all instructional and administrative staff within a school (Grimaldi & Robertson, 2011). Made up of campus administrators, literacy specialists, counselors, parents, and special education teachers, the committee's purpose is to collaborate with the teacher to shift ownership of students' learning from teacher isolation to a team effort in decision-making and instruction. The committee also provides a checks-and-balances system to help both teachers and students through the RTI process and is responsible for deciding what level of support students need (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). In this way, the RTI committee shares responsibility for students' learning with classroom teachers. Through holding teachers accountable for systematic empirical instruction in the classroom and providing support for supplemental tiered instruction, the RTI committee helps teachers deliver consistent and appropriate support where and when needed in the campus RTI process (Swanson, Solis, Ciullo, & McKenna, 2012).

**Progress Monitoring**

Referenced in NCLB (2013) and IDEA (2004) legislation and by the NCRTI (2014) as a key factor in the RTI process, "progress monitoring is a scientifically based practice used to assess students' academic performance and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction" (Cicek, 2012, p. 849). By giving formative assessments on a weekly, biweekly, or monthly basis, teachers can measure students' rate of progress by comparing students' expected and actual learning and adjusting instruction as needed. Supported by researchers, progress monitoring helps educators make informed data-based decisions and adjust instruction to accelerate students' learning. Additionally, effective progress monitoring provides valid documentation of student progress and gives additional data for special education referrals when necessary (Florida Department of Education, 2013).

**Professional Development**

Providing teachers with ongoing professional development (PD) is vital to successful RTI implementation (Bergstrom, 2008; Carlson et al., 2011; Greenfield et al., 2010;Lenski, 2011). As such, districts with successful RTI programs extend both initial and ongoing professional development to all campus personnel (Hall & Mahoney, 2013) and hire expert facilitators and qualified coaches to address targeted areas of deficit for staff and students in areas such as literacy, cultural competence, or behavioral strategies (Mellard et al., 2009).

According to Hall and Mahoney (2013),

> Professional development opportunities for all teachers, paraprofessionals, and administrators involved in the RTI process should first include facilitating the

> understanding of the data collection processes, the data sources, and the data analysis that are necessary to meet the needs of struggling students. (p. 275)

As the RTI process requires teachers to effectively screen, assess, teach, and document student progress, initial staff training to build teachers' understanding of RTI is essential; however, Cooter and Perkins (2011) contested that "many in-service trainings are too wide in scope and shallow in complexity. Under these circumstances, one can hardly expect teachers to learn to implement curricular change meaningfully and effectively" (p. 564). Therefore, PD for RTI must be relevant and timely, helping educators apply theoretical concepts to hands-on application within the classroom. Additionally, facilitators providing PD must have expertise in the RTI process and in related educational fields (Bergstrom, 2008; Greenfield et al., 2010) in order to provide answers to the challenges that arise during RTI implementation (Hoover & Love, 2011; Orosco & Klingner, 2010). While general PD workshops and conferences increase teachers' knowledge, one-time trainings do not give teachers the depth of understanding or the implementation practice they need to be able to effectively collect, analyze, and use student data to guide instruction (O'Connor & Witter Freeman, 2012).

While districts with successful RTI programs provide staff with one-time and ongoing PD opportunities, (Greenfield et al., 2010), districts with unsuccessful RTI programs offer minimal professional development, with teachers receiving only a few hours of initial training and no follow-up support for instruction, assessment, school culture, or culturally responsive teaching (Carlson et al., 2011; Cooter & Perkins, 2011; Orosco & Klingner, 2010). Teachers need additional and ongoing support to improve

their understandings of the overarching RTI process as well as ideas for differentiation, supplemental interventions, assessment and progress monitoring, and the roles of staff members. With little training, educators are more likely to perceive the RTI process as simply a different to special education and refuse to "buy-in" to the RTI instructional framework (Nunn, Jantz, & Butikofer, 2009)

Classroom teachers are the primary agents of change for student learning in the classroom and create the foundation for school-wide success or failure of the RTI process (DePry & Cheesman, 2010; NCLD, 2013; Orosco, 2010). As such, it is critical that educators be qualified to teach students in specified subject areas and build strong learning foundations through high quality daily instruction (Abbot & Wills, 2012; Wixson, 2011). As students' apparent learning deficits may be the result of inadequate teaching, ensuring that teachers are knowledgeable in the subject areas they teach and are using best practices in classroom instruction is vital in helping students achieve success and in reducing special education referrals (Kozleski & Huber, 2010).

While teachers must be highly qualified by state standards in order to teach specific grades and subjects (U.S. Department of Education, 2005), these same teachers are often poorly qualified to implement the RTI process (Mellard et al., 2009). The RTI program requires educators to provide appropriate instruction, make decisions about additional support, interpret assessment data, identify and solve learning problems, and collaborate with various personnel to ensure students' learning success (Abbot & Wills, 2012; Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). Therefore, additional training related to program implementation and procedural expectations is critical. Likewise, as the RTI process

gains momentum in coming years, it is imperative that the district and campus administrators who hire educators fully understand the RTI program and are able to provide PD that helps teachers be successful (Cooter & Perkins, 2011). Staff recruitment procedures used in many districts do not stress the importance of hiring educators who understand the RTI process and have the skills to implement it (O'Connor & Witter Freeman, 2012).

To make the necessary paradigm shifts in thinking that include RTI's best practices in the classroom and multitiered levels of instruction, classroom teachers must perceive the RTI process to be an effective means of improving students' learning (Hoover, 2011). When teachers perceive a process to be meaningful and effective, they are more likely to show ongoing fidelity to it (Hall & Mahoney, 2013). As needs-based learners (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011), educators must understand why change is necessary and must feel valued and empowered initiate it. Therefore, it is crucial that teachers are included in the planning and implementation of all aspects of RTI and feel valued as part of an advocacy-based team (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012).

Educators who understand their roles within the overarching framework of RTI see themselves as agents of change and have positive perceptions of the RTI process (O'Connor & Witter Freeman, 2012; Pyle et al., 2011). Improved understanding has also been shown to improve school-wide collaboration, ongoing professional support, and informed instructional practices (Orosco & Klingner, 2010; Rinaldi et al., 2011). To the contrary, educators who did not feel valued are more likely to be confused and skeptical

of the RTI process, resulting in poor implementation and a lack of fidelity (Carlson et al., 2011; Daves & Walker, 2012).

Researchers have shown the importance of educators' perceptions of the RTI process as it relates to the quality of core classroom instruction. Based on the conceptual frameworks of Gagne's (1965) theory of behaviorism and Bruner's (1966) theory of constructivism, the RTI process blends the systematic approach of instructional theory in the classroom with building on students' prior knowledge to close achievement gaps and accelerate learning. While guidelines recommend that the RTI program be interpreted by school districts to meet the unique needs of student populations, multiple factors including insufficient support, limited knowledge of the RTI program, and inadequate professional development have resulted in confusion in many districts (Abbot & Wills, 2012).

## Implications

Based on the review of the literature, the results of this study could benefit all stakeholders and students XYZ School District by improving administrators' and educators' understanding and implementation of RTI. Researchers have shown a wide variation in how RTI is interpreted and implemented between school districts (Jenkins et al., 2013) resulting from administrators' and educators' limited knowledge of the RTI framework and implementation methods (Abbot & Wills, 2012). As the purpose of this study was to better understand how teachers' perceptions of RTI affect how and what they teach in the classroom to improve student learning, the study's project could be used to improve the effectiveness of RTI implementation through PD. School districts'

independent interpretations of RTI legislation has resulted in confusion in establishing consistent internal RTI procedures (Cicek, 2012). The study project could contribute to the existing body of knowledge aimed at reducing this confusion. Using a qualitative inquiry approach, I investigated the local problem by following a set of pre specified procedures (Yin, 2014) on how elementary classroom teachers' perceptions of the RTI process affected their classroom instruction. I created a thick description (Glesne, 2011) of individuals' perceptions by triangulating data from group interviews, individual interviews, and participants' documentation logs. According to data analysis, there was a need for PD in the areas of RTI, formative assessments, evidence-based practices, and administrative support. Responding to the study's findings, I created a PD plan to improve educators' and administrators' knowledge of and skills used in the RTI process. As limited qualitative research related to teachers' perceptions of RTI currently exists (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014), the results from this study will contribute to both the national body of knowledge and to the needs of teachers in XYZ School District.

## Summary

Section 1 included an overview of RTI and a description of the local problem prompting the study. It also included the rationale for choosing the problem, related special terms, the significance of the study, and guiding questions. In an exhaustive review of the literature, I presented the broad problem and connected it to the local problem. Finally, possible implications that could influence an outcome are suggested. Section 2 contains the methodology for the study including the research design and

approach, participant selection, measures for ethical protection of participants, data collection procedures, and data analysis

# Section 2: The Methodology

## Introduction

Section 2 contains an overview of the research design and approach used in this study and why the approach was appropriate to address the problem. After describing how I selected study participants, I explain the researcher/participant working relationship and describe the steps I took to ensure the ethical protection of participants. I explain data collection procedures, including how and when data were collected and recorded, systems for keeping track of data, procedures for gaining access to participants, and the role of the researcher as it relates to data collection. Types of coding used to reduce and categorize data are described as well as evidence of quality and procedures to assure accuracy and credibility of the findings. Section 2 concludes with a review of procedures for dealing with discrepant cases and a presentation of a discrepancy in this study.

Federal legislation provides school districts with structural guidelines for RTI models (Federal Education Budget Project, 2014), but gives school districts the flexibility of creating RTI infrastructures that respond to the unique needs of students within the district that align with district goals (Daves & Walker, 2012). In XYZ School District, this infrastructure has changed over the years, resulting in differing understanding and implementation of the RTI program between campuses. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative research was to better understand teachers' current understanding of the RTI process and to use study findings to improve and align program implementation.

## Qualitative Approach and Design

A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study as the study's purpose was to gain insight into elementary school teachers' perceptions of and experiences in the RTI process. According to Yin (2014), qualitative researchers explore the views and perspectives of people in real-world settings, using multiple sources of data to better understand a phenomenon, or experience. Additionally, qualitative inquiry requires the researcher to be "the key instrument used to collect data" (Creswell, 2009, pp. 175-176). In this study, I acted as a data collection instrument, compiling information from multiple sources, finding trends and patterns, and interpreting these patterns to create new knowledge (Glesne, 2011). Hypothetical-deductive designs such as experimental, correlational, or survey methods used in quantitative research were not appropriate, as the purpose of this study was to inductively create general knowledge by organizing specific observational data into patterns, categories, and themes (Creswell, 2013).

## Justification for Study Design

A case study design was appropriate for this study, as I wanted to examine and interpret the experiences of a small group of participants related to the phenomenon of RTI (Glesne, 2011). Over a period of four weeks, I observed and interacted with the participants in the real-world context (Creswell, 2013) of their classrooms after school hours to gain a better understanding of their experiences in a more relaxed setting. The four-week window allowed me to take a virtual snapshot, or understand participants' understandings of the particular phenomenon within a bounded period of time (Yin, 2014).

## Participants

### Criteria for Selecting Participants

To ensure that participants had similar characteristics as highly qualified teachers and some knowledge of the RTI process on their campuses (Lodico et al., 2010), I invited only certified elementary classroom teachers to participate in this study. From the 46 elementary schools in the population of interest, I purposefully sampled one Title 1 campus and one non-Title 1 campus, according to campus administrators' response to a blanket invitation e-mail sent by a district administrator.

The term Title 1 is a federal identifier given to schools that qualify for additional federal funding grants due to their serving a high percentage of students from low-income families. This additional funding helps pay for additional staffing and resources to guarantee that children identified as at-risk of failing are able to meet state academic standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Title 1 school administrators must show proof of serving at least 40% of students identified as economically disadvantaged as well as students considered at-risk due to a lack of language, life experiences, or opportunities, (Texas Education Agency, 2008). As federal funding sets expectations and mandates accountability, campus administration and professional development could be affected. Additionally, the increased number of students identified as at-risk may also affect teachers' perceptions, instruction, and the RTI process on a Title 1 campus (Greenfield et al., 2010; Grimaldi & Robertson, 2011; Koleski & Huber, 2011). I purposefully selected one Title 1 campus and one non-Title 1 campus to see if there was a correlation between perceptions of teachers who taught more at-risk students than

teachers who taught fewer at-risk students.

I invited five elementary classroom teachers to participate in focus groups on each campus (Merriam, 2009). The selection criteria for selecting teachers was (a) K-5 full-time classroom teacher, (b) employed by XYZ School District at a specific campus approved for the study, (c) years of experience ranging from 1-30 years as a public school educator, and (d) signed consent to participate in the study. All participants met the sample selection criteria. The participant pool at Campus X consisted of two fifth grade teachers, one fourth grade teacher, and one third grade teacher. On Campus Y, the participant pool consisted of one fifth grade teacher, one fourth grade teacher, one third grade teacher, one second grade teacher, and one first grade teacher.

Focus group interview protocols (see Appendix B) were developed from the overarching research questions and were conducted prior to individual interviews. At the end of each focus group interview, I invited participants to participate in individual interviews, giving them the opportunity to expound on their responses during the group discussion and to give deeper insight into individuals' experiences (Lodico et al., 2010). Individual interviews also gave participants the opportunity to express their opinions more freely, adding to the thick description of the central phenomenon (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). I adjusted individual interview protocols to further probe into responses given during focus group interviews (see Appendix C).

Of the 10 participants, one had 0-5 years of teaching experience, four had 5-10 years of experience, and six had 10-20 years of experience. I coded participants from Campus X as A, B, C, D, and E and participants from Campus Y as 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 to

ensure anonymity when presenting specific quotes in the research findings section.

**Justification for Number of Participants**

Ten total participants were purposefully selected to participate in the study. According to Creswell (2013), "it is better to select a few, rather than many individuals or sites to study to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon" (p. 234). The small sample size allowed me to probe for detailed information that better represented teachers' experiences and attitudes (Glesne, 2011). Purposefully sampling three participants from each focus group for follow-up interviews improved the study's reliability by ensuring consistency of respondents from each selection site (Creswell, 2009).

**Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants**

I gained access to participants by seeking permission from XYZ School District's Research Review Committee. Once permission was granted, I secured approval to conduct research from Walden University's IRB, #10-10-14-0264202, to ensure the protection of the study's participants and the validity and ethical integrity of the study itself (Lodico et al., 2010). I wrote a brief synopsis of the study that the district administrator e-mailed to all campus principals by a district administrator. Two campuses responded: one Title 1 and one non-Title 1. I met with principals on both campuses to review the study's purpose and protocols, including the participant selection criteria: (a) K-5 full-time classroom teacher, (b) employed by XYZ School District at a specific campus approved for the study, (c) years of experience ranging from 1–30 years as a public school educator, and (d) signed consent to participate in the study. I attended

staff meetings on both campuses and gave a short solicitation PowerPoint® (www.microsoft.com) presentation to all staff members. Potential participants completed interest flyers and put them in a sealed box that I left in each campus's mailroom for 1 week. A total of 10 classroom teachers, five from each school, volunteered to participate. All 10 met the selection criteria. I contacted the selected participants through an initial e-mailed contact letter grouped by campus requesting participants' best times for initial focus group interviews to be held after school hours on their respective campuses.

## Data Collection

Three sources of data contributed to this study: two focus group interviews, six individual interviews, and participants' progress monitoring logs. Gathering multiple views about the RTI process from participants representing multiple grade levels and different schools allowed me to synthesize the detailed views of the participants resulting in a thick description of the phenomena (Lodico et al., 2010). I created initial focus group interview protocols (see Appendix B) based on the study's overarching research questions:

1. How do elementary classroom teachers' perceive the RTI process affecting core-classroom instruction?
2. How are teachers' perceptions of RTI influenced by professional development?
3. How are teachers' perceptions of RTI influenced by administrative expectations and ongoing support?

4. What do teachers perceive to be the benefits or challenges of implementing the RTI process?

**Justification for Data Collection Methods**

According to Creswell (2009), the method of inquiry used in a qualitative study must reflect the study's purpose, which is pinpointed by the central question. As the goal of this study was to explore how elementary classroom teachers' perceptions of RTI influence core classroom instruction, conducting initial focus group interviews gave participants who had a shared knowledge of their campus's RTI process the opportunity to discuss their knowledge in an informal, relaxed setting (Merriam, 2009). Listening to each other's thoughts and experiences within the similar context of the same campus setting allowed participants to "capitalize on the creation of new ideas that sometimes would not occur if the participants were interviewed individually" (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011, p. 44). A semistructured interview protocol encouraged participants' discussion of each other's experiences with the RTI process on their campus and in their classrooms (Merriam, 2009), contributing to a thick description of shared and individual participants' views (Glesne, 2011).

I conducted individual follow-up interviews to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences and perceptions independently from their colleagues (Creswell, 2009). Analyzing the initial focus group interview made me aware of several participants' unique perceptions of the RTI process that did not align with national protocols. Consequently, I modified initial individual interview protocols to begin where

focus group interviews stopped to gain a deeper understanding of individuals' perceptions.

Merriam (2009) defined documents used in qualitative research as "a ready-made source of data easily accessible to the imaginative and resourceful investigator" (p. 139) that give written evidence of data created and compiled by participants. Progress monitoring logs used in the RTI process are intended to support students' learning by teachers documenting students' responses to specific instructional strategies that target students' academic gaps (RTI Action Network, 2014). While the format and consistency of teachers' progress monitoring logs reflect administrative expectations and PD, the content reflects instructional strategies, observations, and data on each tier in the RTI process (Speece, 2014).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand elementary classroom teachers' perceptions of the RTI process and how they affected core classroom instruction. Factors affecting teachers' perceptions and classroom instruction, as reflected in the research questions, included PD, ongoing support, and administrator expectations and accountability.

**Data Collection Procedures**

To ensure cogency when conducting a qualitative inquiry, researchers must use established systematic procedures when collecting and analyzing data (Creswell, 2009). I conducted this case study within a 4-week window to get a snapshot of participants' current understandings (Yin, 2014), and began data collection by soliciting a sample of participants at staff meetings on each study site. Once study participants were selected, I

communicated with all participants through e-mail to arrange mutually convenient interview times and dates.

To gain insight from multiple teachers' perspectives and get an overarching picture of each campus' RTI process, I initially conducted focus group interviews with groups of teachers after school hours at each study site (Merriam, 2009). This gave me a collective understanding of the RTI process on each campus in a relaxed discussion format (Creswell, 2012) and also introduced me to individual participant's unique perceptions. Within 1 week of the focus group interviews, I conducted additional individual interviews with three of the five participants in each focus group. According to Glesne (2011), focus interviews can serve as "exploratory research" that helps develop individual interview protocols, while individual interviews provide more in-depth information (p. 134). I modified individual interview protocols to expound upon the unique understanding of each group of interviewees as it related to their respective campuses and to the research questions (see Appendix C). Additional data collected from individual responses gave depth and breadth to the understanding of how RTI was perceived on each campus and contributed to a thick description.

Prior to conducting interviews, I explained consent forms to all participants and answered all questions. I explained that the participants' anonymity would be protected and that they would be given pseudonyms or identifying letters in the final written study. I reviewed the section of the informed consent form (see Appendix F) indicating that I would be accessing participants' documentation logs stored in the district's electronic data storage system as needed for triangulation (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). Progress

monitoring logs are teacher records intended to show what instructional strategies are used on each RTI tier (RTI Action Network, 2014). Study participants' progress monitoring logs provided a deeper insight into participants' grasp of the RTI process. Data included in participants' logs were: measurable goals, instructional strategies, student data, observations, and reflected participants' understanding of RTI.

I recorded all interviews with two hand-held digital recorders to ensure that all were recorded properly and used IRB-approved interview protocols. Focus group interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and individual interviews lasted 30-45 minutes. I took field notes during all interviews to help identify focus group interviewees, record observed nonverbal behaviors, personally reflect on participants' responses, and help construct a holistic account of the data (Merriam, 2009). At the end of each focus group interview, I invited participants to volunteer for follow-up individual interviews after stating how individual interviews give participants the opportunity to further expound on their initial responses (Creswell, 2009).

Immediately after conducting the focus group interviews, I sent the audio files to an IRB-approved professional transcription service and received the transcriptions within 24 hours. I read the transcribed interviews multiple times and used my field notes to identify interviewees and make the necessary edits in the transcriptions to ensure cohesion and understanding. I began an exploratory analysis of the data by identifying the expected topics from my review of the literature and the unexpected topics that emerged. Reading and coding the focus group transcriptions before conducting individual interviews allowed me to revise the tailor the individual interview protocols to

probe more deeply into information obtained during the focus group (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011).

Focus group interview transcripts were mailed in sealed envelopes to all focus group participants as member checks (Creswell, 2009) to assure the best possible accuracy and credibility of findings (Merriam, 2009). I asked participants to read the transcripts for accuracy and to make comments, corrections, or additions as necessary to more accurately represent their perceptions. There were no corrections, deletions or insertions requested.

Within five days of each focus group interview, I conducted individual interviews with three of the five members of group to compare and cross-check "interview data collected from people with different perspectives or from follow-up interviews with the same people" (Merriam, 2009, p. 216). Using modified, semi-structured interview guides (see Appendix C), I met with individual interviewees after school hours in their classrooms for 30-40 minutes. Reviewing the informed consent forms, I reminded participants of the study's risks and benefits and that they were free to discontinue participation at any time if they experienced psychological stress or felt their privacy was violated. I also explained that all information would be kept confidential and guaranteed anonymity.

Similar to focus group interviews, I used two hand-held digital recording devices and IRB-approved interview protocols to record individual interviews. Unlike focus group interviews that lasted 90 minutes, individual interviews took 30-45 minutes. I personally transcribed individual interviews immediately after each interview to avoid

confusion and again sent every participant a printed copy of the transcript in a sealed envelope to check for accuracy.

**Systems for Keeping Track of Data**

To protect study participants' anonymity and ensure confidentiality, to steps to securely store study data. I labeled and saved all audio files to a folder on my personal password-protected laptop as well as to a flash drive to ensure it was stored safely. Focus group interviews were uploaded to an encrypted professional transcription site that was approved by Walden's IRB for immediate transcription. All electronic correspondence, audio files, transcriptions, and typed field notes were saved on a flash drive and locked in a cabinet that was only accessible to me. Paper copies were labeled and stored in a locked filing cabinet in my home and will be shredded after 5 years (Creswell, 2009).

**Role of the Researcher**

For this qualitative inquiry, I acted as a data collection instrument to accurately portray participants' "sustained and intensive experiences" (Creswell, 2009, p. 177). As I am a teacher in the school district with expertise in the topic of inquiry, I took the following steps to avoid bias and ensure the study's credibility: (a) introduced myself as a fellow teacher and doctoral student, (b) refrained from answering questions the participants asked during interviews about the RTI process, (c) used open-ended questions and probes in an interview protocol to elicit views and opinions from participants and not lead them, and (d) kept a field journal of personal reflections during data collection and data analysis (Glesne, 2011).

Currently a dyslexia/literacy interventionist on a Title 1 elementary campus in XYZ School District, I have participated in the RTI process as a researcher, district trainer, campus committee chair, literacy interventionist/coach, and classroom teacher. As such, I was aware that my prior knowledge of the RTI process could influence how I questioned participants, and I worked hard to maintain the role of a listener during all interviews. I did not have supervisory authority over any of the participants, nor had I met participants prior to the start of this study.

## Data Analysis Results

The most important step when analyzing data is "that data analysis is done in conjunction with data collection" (Merriam, 2009, p. 178). In this study, I systematically collected and organized data to explore themes as they emerged. Comparing participants' progress monitoring logs with participants' responses from focus group interviews allowed me to create individual protocols that probed more deeply into participants' experiences. For example, during the focus group interview, both Campus X and Campus Y participants explained how the RTI process worked on their respective campuses. Responding to the question "What are the benefits of RTI?" Teacher E said,

> Well I guess like some of the things that you learn in the meeting you could use like actually with more than just that student. Like for guided reading if I learn a strategy to use with child A then child B can still benefit from that same strategy.

This response gave me insight into the structure and function of the campus's RTI committee, allowing me to narrow my focus and ask more specific questions during individual interviews. Reading each focus group transcript (See Appendix B) multiple

times and comparing it to participants' documentation logs helped me to refine individual probes to be more relevant. Likewise, conducting individual interviews immediately after focus group interviews, comparing progress monitoring logs to individuals' responses, and conducting frequent member checks improved the validity of the study (Creswell, 2009). Although participants' responses varied according to differences in campus RTI procedures, the following six categories emerged during open and axial coding: (a) time, (b) forms, (c) PD, (d) consistency/change, (e) teacher buy-in, and (f) formative assessments.

**Findings**

Merriam (2009) defined the term category in data analysis as "the same as a theme, a pattern, a finding, or an answer to a research question" (p. 178). In this study, I synthesized the six themes that emerged during data analyses: (a) time, (b) forms, (c) PD, (d) consistency/change, (e) buy-in, and (f) formative assessments to address the overarching research questions. Logical implications from the findings are the foundation for the project as discussed in Section 3.

**Research Question 1:** How do elementary classroom teachers' perceive the RTI process affecting core classroom instruction? I found that participants' understanding of RTI varied between campuses as influenced by the use or nonuse of formative assessments in daily instruction, administrative expectations and support, and differing campus RTI protocols. From all interviews, there was one positive statement about how the participant perceived the RTI process; increased awareness. Three negative perceptions emerged from data analysis: indifference, confusion, and frustration.

On Campus X, teachers generally felt the RTI process made them more aware of their students' strengths and deficits. In the data analysis, found that all five participants conducted formative assessments regularly as a part of their daily small group instruction. Additionally, participants used formative assessments to guide daily intervention groups during a campus-wide intervention time. In their documentation logs, the participants collaborated their use of formative assessments by showing data from assessments as well as specific strategies the participants used to respond to the data. In addition to documentation logs, teachers recorded students' progress on a spreadsheet created by the AP was a state-certified diagnostician in XYZ School District.

Separate but parallel roles of Campus X administrators indirectly affected participants' perceptions of the RTI process in Tier 1 classroom instruction. Participants explained that AP was solely responsible for all campus RTI meetings, procedures, and trainings, the principal had set a campus-wide expectation for all teachers to administer pretests and posttests every 3 weeks and give students weekly formative assessments. While participants described RTI as students-of-concern meetings that were run by the AP on an as-needed basis, they also described weekly "data meetings" with the principal to analyze and interpret their students' data gathered from ongoing formative assessments. Participants gave several verbal and nonverbal cues that indicated feelings of resistance to the rigor of the principal's expectations. However, despite participants' frustration with the time required for both the RTI meetings run by the AP and the data meetings run by the principal, all participants understood a primary component of the RTI process: conducting and analyzing formative assessments. While the participants

understood formative assessments to be good teaching practices, they did not realize that they are an integral component of the RTI process (RTI Action Network, 2014). Therefore, Campus X participants perceived RTI to be a part of the best practices they were already using in their classrooms.

Although participants revealed their ubiquitous understanding of an essential component of the RTI process, they also demonstrated limited understandings of RTI's multitiered process. For example, participants understood the RTI committee to be a resource for additional Tier 1 instructional strategies. Teacher 2 commented,

> We just met on a couple of students before [Winter] Break. They were the first RTI meetings that we had. So, I'm going to be using what we talked about in those meetings when we come back from the break during guided reading.

Tier 2 strategies are intended to supplement Tier 1 instruction and are set in the form of short-term measurable goals by the RTI committee (Abbot & Wills, 2012). While the instructional strategies suggested by the RTI committee may benefit students during Tier 1 instruction, the purpose of the RTI committee is to collaborate with teachers to fill students' academic and behavioral deficits (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). Teacher 2 said this when asked to clarify her understandings of Tier 1 and Tier 2: "I really don't know. I know that Tier 1 is basic classroom instruction, but beyond that, it's just... everyone explains it in a different way."

Although participants expressed confusion about the purpose of the tiers in RTI, teachers' participation in daily Tier 2 interventions positively impacted core classroom instruction. All teachers on Campus X taught small groups of students during a daily

campus-wide intervention time. The commercially purchased curriculum used for intervention groups provided a "blanketed" academic support for all struggling students. According to the interviewees, campus intervention groups were made up of a mixture of students who had been identified as needing Tier 2 interventions and students who were just "low" (Teacher C). While daily use of a supplemental curriculum targeting struggling students gave teachers additional strategies they could use in Tier 1 instruction, Tier 2 interventions were generalized for all students.

Based on how the RTI process was implemented on Campus X and on the expectations of campus administrators, participants viewed RTI as a supplemental support to what they were already doing in the classroom. Teacher C, an experienced teacher who described herself as data-driven, stated,

> I think it supports my classroom instruction. I think I am an exponentially better teacher now than I was five years ago and I think that is because I truly understand how to look at my kids. I don't think that is only because of RTI, but I think RTI has helped me be able to identify specific behaviors in students and establish specific goals for me.

Teacher B, an upper grade experienced teacher, added

> I use the process more than I let the process dictate my teaching…When I know I'm going to take a student to RTI, I need to be meeting with him in a small group and working with him 3 times a week. That is the standard if we bring a kid to RTI, but it is also just good teaching practices.

Campus Y participants' perceptions of how the RTI process affected core classroom instruction were less positive than those of Campus X participants. Teachers cited frequently changing protocols and forms, unclear administrator expectations, and a lack of time as reasons. While the AP overseeing the RTI process had been on Campus Y for 2 years and was "very approachable" according to all participants, there were multiple procedural changes in RTI protocols for the second consecutive year, and all participants said that they were confused by the inconsistent Tier 1 and Tier 2 accommodations recommended by the RTI committee. According to the participants, teachers who had recorded Tier 1 data for several months were sometimes told the student could "stay on Tier 1 with accommodations" or "move up to Tier 2 with the same accommodations." If directed to provide additional accommodations on Tier 1, teachers had to change their daily core classroom instruction to include additional accommodations for at-risk students. One such incident required that the teacher design a unit test in multiple formats to see which format worked best for the student. The participant stated, "I can't even remember all the different ways...there were four different versions of every single test, math, spelling, whatever. That takes time!" Time was also a factor for Teacher B: "It [RTI] inhibits my daily classroom instruction because I'm always doing an extra documentation or an extra intervention."

Campus Y participants' focus group responses, individual interview responses, and data in participants' documentation logs evidenced the use of measurable goals to assess students' growth. All participants agreed that goals were established collaboratively with the campus's RTI committee. However, several participants

mentioned that these goals were sometimes unrealistic or irrelevant to the student's needs, adding that they were ineffectual and were "done to say they did them." While all the participants agreed that goals and accommodations could be beneficial, Teacher A stated that goals sometimes seemed like "just one more thing to have to do."

A lack of time to implement additional instructional strategies intended to close achievement gaps was a significant concern for all Campus Y participants. According to Teacher C,

> When are you to do all these extra things with this child? When you question that at RTI they're like… "Don't be a problem. Other teachers are doing it, they just don't say anything." I just really don't see how I can fit that in. They wanted me to do different lesson plans than the other. I was like no. Really, I don't think I can.

Teachers' frustrations affected buy-in to the RTI process on Campus Y. One teacher said, "I can see where teachers get frustrated and give up. I'll just do the best I can in my room."

While both campuses had required daily intervention periods where teachers provided generalized Tier 2 supplemental instruction to low performing students, Campus Y teachers did not give frequent formative assessments to their students as evidenced by their responses and progress monitoring logs. Students in Grades 3-5 were ability-grouped across the grade level into "breakout bunches." Teachers followed the district's online curriculum and differentiated instruction according to the ability of the group that they were teaching. When asked about formative assessments, Teacher 3 said,

> We do IStation© at the beginning of the year. That's formative. We do Development Reading Assessment (DRA) on those students we take to RTI, in math we have a Curriculum-Based Assessment (CBA) every 9 weeks. There isn't one for literacy/reading. We take benchmark tests using released State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) tests to prepare for STAAR.

IStation© (2015) is an online curriculum designed to supplement students' academic achievement in Grades K-8 by integrating systematic student assessments with interactive activities. Created to be a flexible intervention tool for progress monitoring, IStation can provide educators with detailed reports on students' progress in reading. In the data analysis, I found that some participants used IStation for assessments while other participants used IStation as a daily intervention. Teacher C said that she "put her kids on IStation" when not in reading groups between campuses.

How the participants perceived the RTI process affecting classroom instruction varied according to participants' level of understanding of RTI and current classroom practices. Already using SGI and formative assessments in daily classroom instruction, Campus X participants perceived RTI to be a component of the best practices that they were already using. The Campus X principal had placed an emphasis on data-driven instruction. As such, the principal gave ongoing PD and held teachers accountable for using data to guide their classroom instruction. While these practices are important components of RTI classroom instruction, participants were not aware of the connection. Of the six categories that emerged from data analysis, additional time required for paperwork, changing forms, and inconsistent RTI protocols were most challenging for

Campus X teachers. Campus Y participants expressed greater frustration about RTI in all six categories, responding that RTI required additional work and gave them "more hoops to jump through." These teachers used the district's online curriculum and differentiated instruction by homogeneously grouping students by class and rotating classroom instruction. Campus Y teachers also relied on IStation© technology to assess students once per month. One Campus Y participant used SGI and formative assessments to monitor student progress. However, as this participant was following the district's online curriculum timeline, a lack of time affected her perception of RTI. Campus Y participants indicated that they perceived RTI to be additional work that produced minimal results. All study participants responded that the only PD they had received in RTI had been related to RTI paperwork. As such, there was a relationship between participants' limited understandings of the RTI process and their abilities to connect the RTI process to classroom instruction.

**Research Question 2**: How are teachers' perceptions of RTI influenced by professional development? I found that participants unanimously agreed that there was a lack of PD RTI and that more PD was needed. This lack of PD negatively influenced participants' perceptions as participants described themselves as indifferent to or frustrated by RTI. In classroom and campus RTI protocols, the participants revealed a general lack of understanding of RTI's purpose and framework.

All participants responded that RTI training was only given during teacher in-service training at the beginning of the school year. Campus X teachers were sent a PowerPoint® presentation to watch. Teacher A recalled, "It was a PowerPoint® we

watched on our computers. The meeting part was to see if there were any questions. No one had any questions." Teacher B added,

> Really the only training we've had was at the beginning of the school year when we were told, "OK, this is how RTI is going to go this year. This is how you're going to document, and how you're going to request meetings.

Campus Y participants gave similar responses. According to Teacher 3,

> What professional development? I haven't had that much professional development on RTI. We have all that in-service the first couple of days, but we were all so busy scrambling. It was probably touched on. A speaker probably got up and talked for 45 minutes.

Teacher 1 agreed, "Oh, it is pitiful; [xxx] got up and spoke for 20 minutes once, and that was it." As noted in a review of the literature, researchers have shown that providing teachers with initial and ongoing PD is vital to successful RTI implementation (Bergstrom, 2008; Carlson et al., 2011; Greenfield et al., 2010; Lenski, 2011). Initial staff training that builds teachers' understanding of RTI is essential and must be followed by ongoing PD that helps teachers effectively screen, assess, teach, and document student progress (Cooter & Perkins, 2011).

PD on both campuses was conducted by APs or support staff and focused on forms and protocols. However, high turnover rates of APs who have limited knowledge of RTI have created a "revolving door" of protocols and forms. On Campus X, Teacher E stated, "Whoever the facilitator is that year is who leads the trainings. This year it was the assistant principal. She is in charge of RTI so she made her presentations and sent out

everything." Teacher B also spoke of this during an individual interview: "Usually when we get a new AP they have a new way of documenting, new logs or...that's pretty much it." Campus Y participants had similar views. According to Teacher 2,

> I don't think we've had a lot of professional development about RTI, and I know that those teachers who haven't been teaching long, it's probably just what they heard in college or something. We discuss the process every year, and how it's changed and how it continues to change every year at my school at least, but we don't really have professional development. More like procedural changes.

During an individual interview, Teacher 3 admitted that she has "shed tears over the frustration of trying to get help," later adding, "My teammates teach me the most because they've gone through the process and the help that they get for their students is what I can try to help mine."

As noted in the review of literature, school districts with successful RTI programs provided ongoing PD to all educators by individuals with extensive experience in their areas of expertise, such as reading specialists or field experts (Bergstrom, 2008; Greenfield et al., 2010). On the contrary, school districts with unsuccessful RTI programs gave little PD, resulting in teachers harboring feelings of anxiety and frustration.

All study participants' perceptions of RTI were either not influenced due to a lack of PD or negatively influenced by inconsistent PD in only one area of RTI. Both groups of elementary teachers agreed that there is a need for consistent and ongoing PD in RTI. As participants had only received limited training related to campus RTI protocols, they

were unable to discuss components of the RTI process such as progress monitoring and evidence-based strategies. A lack of PD impacted the other five categories that emerged from data analysis. Participants felt that they were wasting time by repeatedly doing the same things or completing paperwork to prove what did not work. Teachers guessed which forms to use or did not fill out forms because the forms were always changing. Finally, teachers had an overall lack of buy-in to RTI due to their frustration with the process. All study participants stated a need and expressed a desire for additional and consistent PD in RTI.

**Research Question 3**: How are teachers' perceptions of RTI influenced by administrative expectations and ongoing support? I found that participants' perceptions of RTI were both positively and negatively influenced by expectations of campus administrators and by goals set by campus RTI committees. Administrators' ongoing PD in components of RTI improved participants' implementation strategies. However, high turnover rates of APs adversely affected teachers' fidelity of implementation and buy-in.

Three administrative factors influenced the RTI process on both campuses: (a) the principal, (b) the AP, and (c) the RTI committee. While neither principal was directly involved in the RTI process, principals' expectations of Tier 1 classroom instruction and Tier 2 interventions during campus-wide intervention time affected teachers' perceptions. Apart from RTI meetings run by the AP, Campus X principal met with teachers in weekly data meetings to review students' progress. Additionally, Campus X principal expected all teachers to give formative and summative assessments at regular intervals in their classrooms and during intervention time. Participants revealed some feelings of

frustration and anxiety from the principal's expectations and additional meetings as exemplified by Teacher 3's comment: "The question is, what do we NOT do at our PLCs?" However, as noted in the Research Question 1 narrative, Campus X participants' perceptions of the RTI process benefitted from their knowledge and practice of formative summative assessments.

Campus Y participants stated that while they were not aware of an instructional focus for the year, their principal expected them to use technology. Participants cited using the district's online curriculum, iPads, and IStation© to assess students. Participants also mentioned a new support teacher with "some kind of background knowledge of RTI" who had recently transferred to Campus Y and had integrated technology that included as Google© documents and Live Binder into campus RTI protocols. Four of the five participants expressed frustration at their lack of knowledge with "all this new technology" in addition to understanding RTI. Probing to better understand participants' use or nonuse of formative assessments, I learned that many Campus Y teachers used IStation© to give students monthly reading assessments with grade-level teams collaboratively deciding how to best incorporate the program to meet the needs of their students.

As noted in Research Question 2, IStation© is a computer-based reading program created by Apple© computers that is free to all public schools (IStation, 2014). Designed to create individualized lessons that target students' deficits based on responses to online reading passages, IStation is an individualized progress monitoring tool. When I asked

participants how they measured students' reading growth, all responded that they relied on IStation to give them the data. Teacher 1 further explained,

> Istation© doesn't have the level, but once a month IStation© automatically gives a test so what we have been doing is the first week of the month, my grade is giving a test to see where they are… That is how we currently do it. You know, things always change. This year we decided that we would give the once-a-month test. If we feel we want to squeeze a day in we do, but it's not necessarily on the calendar.

The APs at both study sites were responsible for campus RTI processes and created progress monitoring forms unique to each campus for teachers to use. With both campuses having high turnover rates of APs, protocols and forms continually changed resulting in participants feeling frustrated. Teacher C stated,

> I think our changing assistant principals so many times has something to do with it. This person wants you to bring the kitchen sink, this person wants to you bring you iPad®, which I hate, and then this person wants you to re-read everything in Aware which takes forever because Aware is so unfriendly. One AP approached it as, 'What can I do to help you'? That was helpful. When I asked her questions, she would say, 'I don't know, but let me find out'. She was an RTI facilitator in another district for years.

Eduphoria Aware (2009) is a data analysis tool designed to help educators analyze their students' formative and summative assessment data to drive classroom instruction. According to Campus X participants, teachers do not receive formal training in how to

use Aware. Rather, colleagues share what they know about the program on an as-needed basis.

When analyzing data, I noticed that forms and RTI protocols changed when the AP changed, leading me to wonder about the frequency and consistency of the PD that APs receive. Teacher 2's response, "Every year we've had different administrators and RTI changes depending on who the administrator is" led me to understand that RTI protocols varied from campus to campus based on the knowledge of the current AP.

According to the review of the literature, the RTI committee is made up of a core group of campus educators including administrators, literacy specialists, counselors, parents, and special education teachers (Greenfield et al., 2010). Ideally, the RTI committee is led by a knowledgeable RTI facilitator or campus administrator and serves as a checks-and-balances system to help teachers through the RTI process (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). As I interviewed participants, I questioned in my field notes what training RTI committee members received. When referring to the RTI committee, Teacher 4 said, "It seems to change every year and you don't know what the expectations are until you take your first kid there that year or whatever. You learn as you go." Additional discussion during a focus group interview revealed that RTI committee members were not experts in setting measurable goals, resulting in teachers' frustration.

*Teacher 5*: When they set the interventions they put a measurable goal, I Mean a numerical measurable goal next to it, no matter what it is.

*Moderator*: What do you mean?

*Teacher 5*: If it's a behavior issue, then you need to have documentation and then…like the 75% or something.

*Teacher 3*: It's like they come up with these random numbers..

*Teacher 2*: Every single time…and I've got two kids in RTI this year. It's like they put a number there. I go, alrighty then, you know?

*Moderator*: Can you give me an example?

*Teacher 2*: Like, a student won't act up 25% of the time or 50% of the time. How do you measure that?

To effectively serve as a checks-and-balances system, RTI committee members must understand the overarching framework of RTI's multitiered system as well as their roles within it (Cooter & Perkins, 2011). Therefore, it is essential that RTI committee members have a clear understanding of RTI's multitiered process as well as expertise in their subject fields (Carlson et al., 2011).

Campus administrators' expectations of participants' teaching practices outside of the RTI process have positively affected participants' perceptions of RTI. The participants perceived principals and APs to have excellent leadership skills, setting clear expectations, and holding teachers accountable to use best teaching practices. However, participants perceived campus administrators and RTI teams to have limited understandings of RTI, resulting in inconsistent expectations and support. Continually changing expectations of forms and necessary paperwork resulted in added time and

confusion. In short, the participants felt that their administrators were competent and supportive, but lacked training in RTI.

**Research Question 4**: What do teachers perceive are the benefits or challenges of implementing the RTI process? I found that the participants perceived that the primary benefit of the RTI process was teachers' increased awareness of their students' needs. Perceived challenges included a lack of time to implement, document, and collaborate with peers; confusion on which forms to use and how to complete them; a lack of overall PD; and continually changing expectations for implementation and protocols.

Increased awareness was the consistent response from all participants when asked about the benefits of RTI. During a focus group discussion, one participant said, "I think seeing red flags for other students that were incoming to me, then I can know how to work with them differently." Teacher A expounded during an individual interview, "Overall I think it validates that we're on the right path with the student and sometimes gives us new ideas that we haven't thought of for a long time and holds us accountable. It is a good support."

A primary challenge of implementing the RTI process revealed by participants was a lack of time. Teacher 1 stated, "It takes forever to get absolutely nowhere" with two other participants adding "The challenge for me comes in finding time to sit down and get into Aware and fill in the logs" and "time is the biggest challenge, and knowing how to document." Understanding how and when to fill out the appropriate forms was another significant challenge for participants. Teacher A stated, "The forms and paperwork can be intimidating, which why I think some of us don't take as many students

to RTI as we could or should," and Teacher 5 added, "Sometimes I just guess which form to use." Participants' responses to Research Questions 2 and 3 address the challenges of PD and change. According to Hoover (2011), classroom teachers must perceive the RTI process as an effective means of improving students' learning if they are to make the necessary paradigm shifts in thinking to implement the RTI process. Teachers who perceive a process to be meaningful and effective are more likely to buy-in and show ongoing fidelity to it (Hall & Mahoney, 2013). When asked about teacher buy-in, one focus group responded,

*Moderator*: Okay. So last question… What do you see is the level of teacher buy-in on this campus for RTI?

*Participant*: I think it used to be higher.

*Participant*: Oh yeah. What? What do you mean by buy-in?

*Moderator*: Like, 'I believe in the process.'

*Participant*: Years ago…

*Participant*: Zero.

*Participant*: Years ago, I felt like there was a more positive…

*Participant*: Outcome…

*Participant*: …feelings and outcome and everything towards it.

*Participant*: And every year it continues to become more drawn out to where we really don't know what to expect or we just expect the worst or more work or whatever from it. So, I feel like that buy-in is diminishing year after year.

*Participant*: It seems like a lot of it is just for show.

*Participant*: Exactly.

*Participant*: Just to say we do it.

*Participant*: If anything came back, parents do get upset. Well, they were in the RTI process.

*Participant*: It's almost like you have to do it to document that you helped that kid.

The feelings that the participants shared are not unique to the XYZ School District. Teachers in many school districts are frustrated with the RTI process due to increased paperwork; inadequate training; and time to create, provide, and analyze appropriate assessments (Bergstrom, 2008; Rinaldi et al., 2011; Swanson et al., 2012). In a recent study of 142 elementary teachers, Spear-Swerling and Cheesman (2012) found that teachers who had not received PD in RTI implementation strategies were generally unfamiliar with research-based programs and interventions, resulting in poor program implementation. However, study participants who had received PD in RTI had more positive perceptions of the RTI process and significantly outperformed their peers delivering the program with fidelity. In addition to PD, strong administrative support is critical in supporting the challenges teachers face in understanding RTI (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014). Teachers are more likely to have positive perceptions of RTI when they see themselves as integral components of the process (O'Connor & Witter Freeman, 2012; Pyle et al., 2011).

Participants on both elementary campuses agreed that there is a need for

consistent and ongoing PD in RTI. Specific areas impacting participants' understanding were (a) ineffectual use of time, (b) continually changing formats and expectations of RTI forms, (c) inadequate PD, (d) changing protocols effected by changing administrators, and (e) teacher buy-in. While the participants perceived the current challenges of RTI to outweigh the benefits, the participants were eager to gain a better of RTI and to provide high quality support to their struggling students.

Given the integral role teachers play in RTI, examining their perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes is crucial to determine what supports are appropriate to sustain successful program implementation (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014). RTI is an educational reform effort requiring educators and administrators to make a paradigm shift from traditional teaching and special education referral methods (DePry & Cheesman, 2010). As such, understanding how teachers' perceive the program is the first step towards sustainable program implementation.

**Discrepant Cases**

Negative or discrepant cases may occur during a study when a respondent's viewpoint differs from the main body of evidence or if the researcher encounters unexpected or contradictory data (Glesne, 2011). While these data may reveal the researcher's subjectivity or biases, they add depth and complexity to the study by broadening the views and adding complexity to the researcher's findings. The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to better understand how elementary classroom teachers' perceptions of the RTI process affected their classroom instruction. While participants'

perceptions varied by selection site and subjects taught, no discrepant cases related to teachers' perceptions of RTI emerged during data analysis and member checks.

Unexpected data appeared when comparing the responses of participants who worked at a Title 1 School with those who did not work at a Title 1 School. When planning this study, I purposefully selected one Title 1 campus and one non-Title 1 campus to explore the possible correlation between perceptions of teachers who taught more at-risk students with teachers who taught fewer at-risk students. As RTI was developed to support students who are more likely to experience learning difficulties (Pyle et al., 2011), and as Title 1 schools serve more at-risk students (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), teachers working at a Title 1 School may experience a higher number of students needing RTI support. Approximately 64% of the students enrolled at the Title 1 qualified as economically disadvantaged, which was higher than district and state averages. Comparitavely, only 24% of the students in the non-Title 1 campus were economically disadvantaged. As poverty is a primary indicator of students at risk of failing (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), I wondered if participants at the Title 1 school would have different perceptions of the RTI process than participants at the non-Title 1 school. In RTI studies conducted in settings serving high risk populations, researchers showed the need for additional teacher support for sustainable program implementation (Beecher, 2011; Greenfield et al., 2010; Grimaldi & Robertson, 2011; Koleski & Huber, 2011). When I compared participants' responses and documentation logs, I was surprised to find no significant differences in the number of at-risk students being served through RTI between Campus X and Campus Y participants. While the

purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to better understand teachers' perceptions of the RTI process and did not address the number of students being served through the RTI process, I had anticipated that teachers working on the Title 1 campus would need more structure and support to serve a higher volume of students. This was not the case, possibly because both campuses provided blanket approaches through daily small group support to all students. As both groups of participants described many of their students as struggling, the increased number of socioeconomically disadvantaged students was not relevant in the RTI framework of either school.

**Evidence of Quality**

I showed evidence of quality by triangulating data collected from group interviews, individual interviews, and participants' documents and by conducting member checks by sending all participants hard copies of the transcriptions (see Appendix C) in sealed envelopes. I then contacted every participant with a phone call to follow up. After reading the transcripts multiple times, I color coded similar responses and created coding tables for categories as they emerged (See Appendix D). Coding tables allowed me to focus on each category independently and interpret participants' responses as they related to the research questions. The findings were based on these interpretations. To protect the anonymity of the study's participants, all audio recordings of verbal responses and transcriptions are stored in a locked file cabinet in my home.

**Procedures to Ensure Accuracy and Credibility**

To establish credibility and confirm that the findings in this study aligned with the study's purpose and with reality, I took steps during the data collection and data analysis

to ensure qualitative validity and reliability and to avoid bias (Creswell, 2009). I began data collection after receiving approval to conduct research from the XYZ School District and from Walden's IRB (#10-10-14-0264202) and followed the approved procedures. Before data were collected, all participants were informed of the study's purpose, possible risks, and participants' rights and responsibilities. All participants signed a voluntary consent form prior to data collection. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed in their entirety, and transcripts were stored digitally within password-protected folders on my private laptop. Hard copies of transcripts used for coding were kept in a locked file box. To ensure the credibility of the data, participants were thrice asked to confirm or refute interview transcripts and interpretations from triangulated data. No discrepancies were identified. Participants were assigned identifiers to protect their privacy and the privacy of their schools. I made every effort to avoid bias by establishing myself as a doctoral student and peer, taking field notes during and after interviews, and keeping a reflective journal during data analysis (Glesne, 2011). I ensured the accuracy of data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013) by using two high quality recording devices to record interviews, and I triangulated data from interviews and participants' documents to build coherent justification. I confirmed the accuracy of the findings through member checks and monitored personal biases by asking a colleague with knowledge of the RTI process to review my analyses, interpretations, and conclusions as a peer debriefer.

**Program Outcome: Response to Intervention Professional Development Modules**

Based on the educational problem and research findings from the case study, the goal of the project was to improve teachers' and administrators' understandings of the purpose and process of RTI and to strengthen teachers' classroom instructional practices. The training modules selected for the project target teachers' understandings of the theory and application of RTI in the classroom and administrators' understandings of protocols for effective and sustainable program implementation.

Due to state budget cuts in education, the number of district-level personnel in XYZ School District has been reduced and several departments have been combined (Burnam, 2013; Parr personal communication, 2013). RTI has been combined with elementary literacy and dyslexia, and principals have autonomy on how RTI is implemented on their own campuses. Although the district trains new APs in RTI and encourages all APs to attend additional ongoing PD, the campuses' principals delegate who will spearhead RTI practices on every campus. As such, some campuses have strong RTI programs while others do not. Additionally, the high turnover rate of some schools' APs in XYZ School District creates continual change in RTI understanding and practices. The PD project's digital format will offer uniform program delivery to all learners, eliminating the need for campus APs to design their own campus PD and ensuring the consistent district-wide alignment of expert-created curriculum.

Although RTI was introduced to XYZ School District in 2006, a qualitative approach to help administrators better understand teachers' perceptions of the RTI process had not been previously conducted in XYZ School District. Findings from this

study had the potential to positively impact social change by broadening campus and district administrators' awareness of teachers' perceptions of RTI and related practices in the classroom.

## Summary

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to better understand how elementary classroom teachers' perceptions of RTI affect their classroom instruction in a large southwestern school district. Information presented in Section 2 included the qualitative tradition, rationale, methodologies, and findings of the qualitative case study conducted in XYZ School District. Analyses of data collected from 10 elementary school classroom teachers at two study sites through focus group interviews, individual interviews, and teachers' progress monitoring documentation were the foundation for the PD project. Interpretive and inductive analyses were used to triangulate and synthesize the data and guide the qualitative narrative.

Responding to the study's research questions, four findings emerged as guiding principles for the creation of this project. The first was that formative assessments, differing campus protocols, and degree of teacher buy-in influenced teachers' perceptions of the RTI process. The second finding was the need for consistent, quality PD that improves teachers' understanding of RTI. The third finding was the need for PD to improve campus administrators' and RTI committee members' expertise in RTI protocols and expectations. The fourth finding was that teachers perceived the challenges of RTI to be greater than the benefits, specifically identifying the following areas: (a) ineffectual use of time, (b) continually changing formats and expectations of forms, (c) inadequate

PD, (d) changing protocols effected by changing administrators, and (e) teacher buy-in. These findings align with the literature on teachers' and administrators' limited understanding of the RTI purpose and process (Carlson et al., 2011; Fuchs et al., 2010; Sugai & Horner, 2009).

In Section 3, I introduce, explain, and justify the PD plan that I created in response to the study's findings, and I present a literature review, a project evaluation plan, and possible project implications.

# Section 3: The Project

## Introduction

In Section 3, I review the PD project that addresses the study findings discussed in Section 2. In this section, I describe the project and project goals and justify why a PD plan is an appropriate genre to address the problem. After reviewing current literature on the project's genre and content, I discuss needed resources and propose an implementation timeline for district personnel, campus administrators, and teachers. I also anticipate potential barriers that could impede implementation and propose short- and long-term evaluation methods that include all stakeholders. Section 3 concludes with a discussion of implications the project could have on social change and on its potential importance to both local stakeholders and a broader audience.

## Project Description and Goals

According to the findings from the case study conducted in a large southwestern school district, there was a district-wide need for additional PD in areas related to RTI. Based on these findings, I developed a district-wide PD plan that includes an evidence-based series of online training modules and additional RTI resources with following goals:

1. Improve educators' and administrators' understandings of the RTI process
2. Improve educators' use of formative assessments
3. Improve educators' understandings of evidence-based practices
4. Improve campus administrators' understandings of RTI procedures and protocols to improve district-wide alignment of RTI

The PD plan also includes an implementation timeline for district administrators, campus administrators, and teachers and proposes how to integrate all plan components with the district's current online learning academy and website. Additionally, I propose various ways to formatively assess the project's implementation and evaluate its effectiveness.

## Rationale for Project Genre

A PD plan was selected as the genre, or format, for this project as it comprehensively addresses the needs of local teachers and administrators who were identified in the case study findings. All participants had a limited knowledge of the RTI process, and their perceptions varied according to the knowledge and direction of the current campus AP. All participants expressed a need and desire for additional PD in RTI. Supporting the body of evidence showing the need to provide educators with ongoing PD in RTI (Fuchs et al., 2012; Grimaldi & Robertson, 2011; Johnston, 2010; O'Connor & Witter Freeman, 2012), the proposed PD plan offers a logical and comprehensive solution.

## How the Project Addresses the Problem

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to better understand how teachers' perceptions of RTI affect core classroom instruction. According to the study findings, participants were either ambivalent towards RTI or felt frustrated with the process. All of the participants agreed that the RTI process changed from year to year and impacted instructional time. Interviewee's responses corroborated the response from an XYZ School District administrator indicating that teachers' understanding of the RTI process varied from campus to campus according to administrators' expectations and campus

protocols (Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction, personal communication, July 3, 2013). Therefore, to address the initial problem, it was necessary to first address the overarching problem of teachers' unfamiliarity with the RTI process. Because researchers have shown that teachers' understandings of the RTI process are paramount to effective RTI implementation (Pyle et al., 2011), consistent high quality PD affects a program's success (Bergstrom, 2008; Carlson et al., 2011).

Components of the PD plan include a series of evidence-based online training modules, an implementation timeline, evaluation measures, and supporting resources for educators and administrators. Developed by experts in RTI in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Education, the plan's online training modules are grounded in the how people learn (1999) learning theory. The IDEA and Research for Inclusive Settings (IRIS) RTI training modules are designed to challenge and engage adult learners using relevant real-world situations in the RTI process. When systematically implemented according to the project's recommended timeline, information presented in the RTI training series addresses RTI implementation discrepancies between campuses. Written by experts in the field of RTI, the IRIS (2013) training series provides educators and administrators in XYZ School District with a universal and reliable source to improve the understanding and implementation of RTI.

## Review of the Literature

In the literature reviewed in this section, I address the content of the project through a PD plan (see Appendix A). In contrast to the literature reviewed in Section 1 on the local problem within the context of a broader one, in the literature reviewed in

Section 3, I discuss the research and theory surrounding the genre and content of the project proposed as a solution. Addressing the findings from the local case study, the PD plan focuses on learner outcomes in the following areas:

1. Improve educators' and administrators' understandings of the RTI process
2. Improve educators' use of formative assessments
3. Improve educators' understanding of evidence-based practices
4. Improve and align campus administrators' understanding of RTI protocols

To gain an in-depth understanding of the genre and content of the PD project, I conducted an exhaustive search of current peer-reviewed sources using EBSCO©, SAGE©, and Walden dissertations databases. Boolean search terms included *professional development*, *professional learning*, *RTI*, *adult learning*, *digital learning*, *evidence-based practices*, *social change*, *online learning*, *progress monitoring*, *formative assessments*, and *leadership*. Reviewing literature related to the project's genre and content shows how the project addresses the local problem and validates why it is an appropriate genre.

**Professional Development Plan as an Appropriate Genre**

According to the study findings, teachers were frustrated by the lack of PD and continually changing campus RTI. All participants agreed that there was a need for PD in RTI and all expressed a desire to learn more about the RTI process. RTI researchers have proven the importance of providing ongoing PD to improve educators' understanding of and fidelity to the RTI process (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Kovaleski, 2013).

RTI is a complex process that requires teachers and administrators to change the way they think about teaching (Pyle et al., 2011) while also learning a wide range of new skills, including data collection processes, data analysis, and various approaches to monitor students' progress (Sullivan & Long, 2010). According to Guskey (2002), ongoing PD is critical in addressing any large scale reform effort such as RTI. The many facets of the RTI program combined with the multiple levels of personnel to be trained, including district and campus administrators, RTI committee members, teachers, and support staff, make ongoing PD a necessity on many levels (Grimaldi & Robertson, 2011).

Guskey (2000) stated that effective PD must be "intentional, ongoing, and systematic" (p. 16). The PD plan systematically addresses multiple aspects of RTI with educators and administrators over 8 months. In addition to educating learners about RTI's overarching framework, the plan's training modules address challenges on the campus and classroom levels (IRIS Center, 2013). Both district-wide trainings that provide a continuity of content and individual campus trainings are paramount to sustain campus and district reform efforts (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010).

Adults are needs-based learners, meaning that they learn best when placed in authentic situations where they have a need to know (Knowles, 2011). Additionally, adults are problem solvers who value shared authority and real-world challenges (Guskey, 2002). The digital training modules and list of RTI resources in the PD plan provide teachers and administrators with the flexibility to learn as situations present themselves. The training modules also provide authentic situations in the RTI process (IRIS

Center, 2015) to make learning meaningful and relevant.

The PD plan includes a series of RTI online training modules developed by the IDEA ’04 and IRIS Center (2013). Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, all IRIS training modules are based on Bransford, Brown, and Cocking’s (1999) how people learn theory. The modules are designed to be used by professors and PD facilitators, but are universally available for independent use. All of the modules begin with real-world educational scenarios, challenging learners to explore what they currently know about the module’s topic of inquiry. The plan’s implementation timeline that systematically integrates the IRIS training modules into district and campus learning protocols over an 8-month period provides teachers and administrators with evidence-based information about RTI presented in a universal format that is relevant and challenging.

Technology and innovation are primary components of XYZ School District’s Strategic Design Plan (LISD, 2015) and are encouraged in all areas of learning. Teachers have access to an online curriculum, elementary students are provided with personal tablets, secondary students use cellular phones for interactive learning, and many staff PD opportunities are provided through the district’s online learning academy. As teachers’ perceptions of the overall RTI process are influenced by the amount of training they receive (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014), and as the online PD plan can be easily integrated into XYZ School District’s current online PD, a PD plan was an appropriate project genre to address the local problem.

**Online Professional Development**

Widely accepted as a preferred method for teaching and learning, technology-enhanced learning is an integral part of educational institutions (Kinchin, 2012). Adults learn best when they have the freedom to choose what is being taught (Knowles et al., 2011). As such, online learning's self-paced and flexible learning format provides an optimal environment for successful adult learning (Bransford et al., 1999). While some individuals are challenged by the self-discipline that this independent learning design requires, online learning offers an alternative way to gain new knowledge that extends beyond the limits of time and space of face-to-face classrooms (Kuo, 2014). Additionally, well designed and reliable online PD platforms can result in improved learning (Dede, Ketelhut, Whitehouse, Breit, & McCloskey, 2009). Therefore, when combined with the flexibility and accessibility it offers to a wide range of students, online learning is an optimal teaching method for a wide range of learners (Wan, 2011).

To select a high quality online training program that would support the project's intended learning outcomes, I reviewed many websites that offered online training, including RTI4Success, Florida Center for Reading Research, The NRCLD Learning Disabilities Resource Kit, The RTI Action Network, The Center on Instruction, and What Works Clearinghouse. I selected the IDEA and IRIS Center's training program because of current research (Dede et al., 2009; Kuo, 2014) and because of the program's clearly defined format and ease of use (IRIS Center, 2013).

**IRIS Digital Professional Development Modules**

Grounded in the theoretical framework of how people learn (Bransford et al.,1999), the systematic and hierarchical approach of the IRIS training modules are also supported by Gagne's (1965) conditions of learning theory that anchored this study's theoretical framework (Knowles et al., 2011). According to Gagne, effective teaching means arranging the conditions that are external to the learner in a logical order so that learning is systematic and sequential. The RTI for the Teachers Module Sequence begins by introducing the fundamentals of RTI and builds on these fundamentals by connecting them to real-world problems teachers experience in the classroom.

According to Kuo (2014), "the content of the IRIS modules is well developed and provides the participants with in-depth knowledge and concrete examples to solve the problems in the scenarios" (p. 621). All IRIS training modules are formatted using the Software Technology for Action and Reflection (STAR) legacy model cycle of inquiry to provide a uniform and sequential learning approach. The training modules can be integrated into the district's online learning academy so that all professional educators and administrators receive the same information from one credible source.

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) at Vanderbilt University/Peabody College and Claremont Graduate College Universally available, the IRIS resources are used by college instructors, PD facilitators, and practicing educators to meet the following national standards:

- Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Preparation (CATP)
- Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Initial Level Special Educator

Preparation

- Division for Early Childhood (DEC) Recommended Practices in Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education
- Interstate Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (In TASC) model core teaching standards
- National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Teacher Preparation Institutions (Dede et al., 2009; IRIS Center, 2013; Kuo, 2014)

The PD plan I proposed for the XYZ School District includes an implementation timeline intended to systematically build learners' knowledge of RTI. Sequentially introducing the eight training modules in the RTI for the Teachers Module Sequence over 8 months allows teachers and administrators time to collaboratively integrate the concepts taught in the modules with the four areas of need identified in the local study: RTI, formative assessments, evidence-based practices, and administrative support.

**Guiding Research that Supports the Content of the Project**

The digital PD project was created as a possible solution to problems identified by the study's findings. Teachers' and administrators' understanding of RTI varied from campus to campus and from year to year in XYZ School District, resulting in teachers feeling confused and frustrated. Protocols and forms were also inconsistent on both study sites and reflected the high turnover rate of APs. Of the six themes that emerged during data analysis (time, forms, PD, consistency/change, teacher buy-in, and formative assessments), all could be addressed through PD. The study participants indicated a need

for PD in RTI that extended beyond the review of changes in yearly protocols given at staff in-service trainings. The recommended solution of district-wide online training from one credible source would lead to the development of a uniform knowledge base for all stakeholders in XYZ School District. Based on the findings summarized in Section 2, the project targets PD in these four areas: (a) improve educators' and administrators' understanding of the RTI process, (b) improve educators' use of formative assessments, (c) improve educators' understandings of evidence-based practices, and (d) improve and align campus administrators' understanding of RTI protocols.

**Improve educators' and administrators' understanding of RTI.** Teachers' understanding of RTI is a critical factor in successful RTI implementation, creating the foundation for school-wide success or failure (DePry & Cheesman, 2010; NCLD, 2013; Orosco, 2011). Additionally, effective administrative leadership and buy-in are key in making an RTI model successful (White & Polly, 2012). As the importance of teachers' understanding of RTI was presented in the initial review of literature, I address how the digital PD provides a solution to teachers' and administrators' limited understanding of RTI in XYZ School District. The XYZ School District's State Education Agency stated the importance of teachers' understanding of the RTI process:

> Teachers, of course, are the most important component of an RTI team and need to understand all aspects of RTI. Since teachers provide the bulk of the instruction and have the most opportunity to observe student progress, their support of RTI is crucial to success. Teachers should be included in every stage of developing an RTI model…General education teachers may need training in many practices

> currently used primarily by special education teachers. (Texas Education Agency, 2008, p. 5)

While RTI is a federally initiated program, it is not federally funded (Kovaleski, 2013; NDCCD, 2011). Instead, school districts are encouraged to use up to 15% of their special education budgets to support the RTI program (NCRTI, 2014). As a result, many RTI programs are the responsibility of school districts' special education departments. According to the TEA (2008), "the expertise of special education teachers can strengthen general education instruction as they provide that training" (p. 5). However, the RTI process is also viewed by some as inclusive of general and special education initiatives and cutting across general, compensatory, and special education curricula (International Reading Association, 2015). In XYZ School District, RTI has been designated as a general education program (Executive Director of Curriculum and Instruction, personal communication, July 3, 2013). Originally the responsibility of the district's language arts department, RTI has changed hands due to district budget and reduced personnel. Currently, the RTI program is jointly governed by the executive director of curriculum and instruction and is the responsibility of campus administrators and is conducted on individual campuses or secondary schools and by the dyslexia and literacy intervention coordinator for elementary schools. District-level PD related to RTI is designed for APs and for campus-based dyslexia/literacy interventionists. As seen in XYZ School District's online PD webpage (Figure 2), PD in RTI is currently provided for campus dyslexia/ literacy interventionists. PD is for all other educators and support staff.


*Figure 2*. RTI is combined with dyslexia/literacy interventions

**RTI for teachers' module sequence**. After reviewing many of the 61 training resources related to RTI on the IRIS Center's website, I selected the sequence of modules recommended by the IRIS Center (see Figure 3) to support the project's four learning goals.

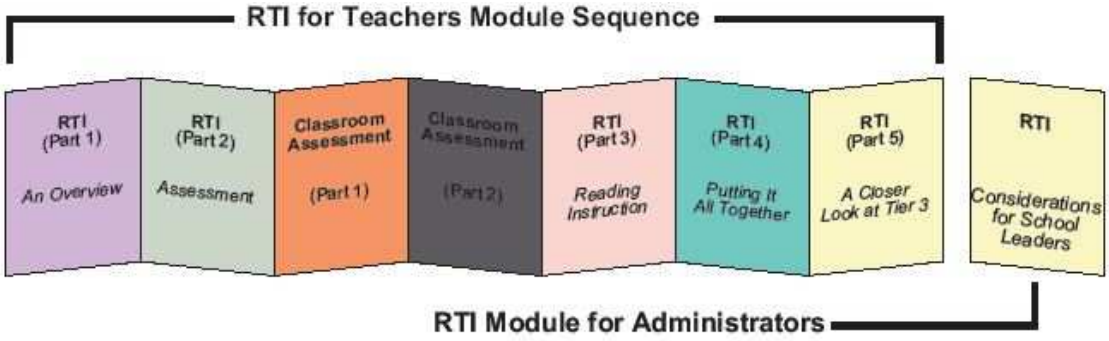


*Figure 3* IRIS center's RTI for teachers' module sequence

Based on Bransford et al.'s (1999) how people learn theory, the initial module of the sequence provides teachers with a problem-based overview of the RTI process and compares it to the IQ discrepancy model used in special education. The second module, Assessments, explores in detail the assessment procedures integral to the RTI process including universal screening and formative assessments. The third and fourth Classroom Assessment modules educate teachers on the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively use progress monitoring and data analysis in the classroom and are discussed later in the review. The fifth module, Reading Instruction, focuses on factors that affect reading success, including high quality instructional practices in the classroom and evidence-based supplemental programs and practices. The sixth module returns to the whole by synthesizing the information presented in Modules 1, 2, and 3 and by providing a comprehensive illustration of how to successfully implement RTI on a school campus. RTI (Part 5): A Closer Look at Tier 3 helps educators see the purpose of and practices used in Tier 3 interventions. As all of the local study participants were

confused by Tier 3 interventions, this final module for educators is relevant and applicable.

All IRIS modules include training outlines (see Figure 4) that provide university professors, PD facilitators, or independent educators with an overview of key questions, objectives, and resources (Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, 2015). As previously noted, all modules begin with a relevant challenge or problem.

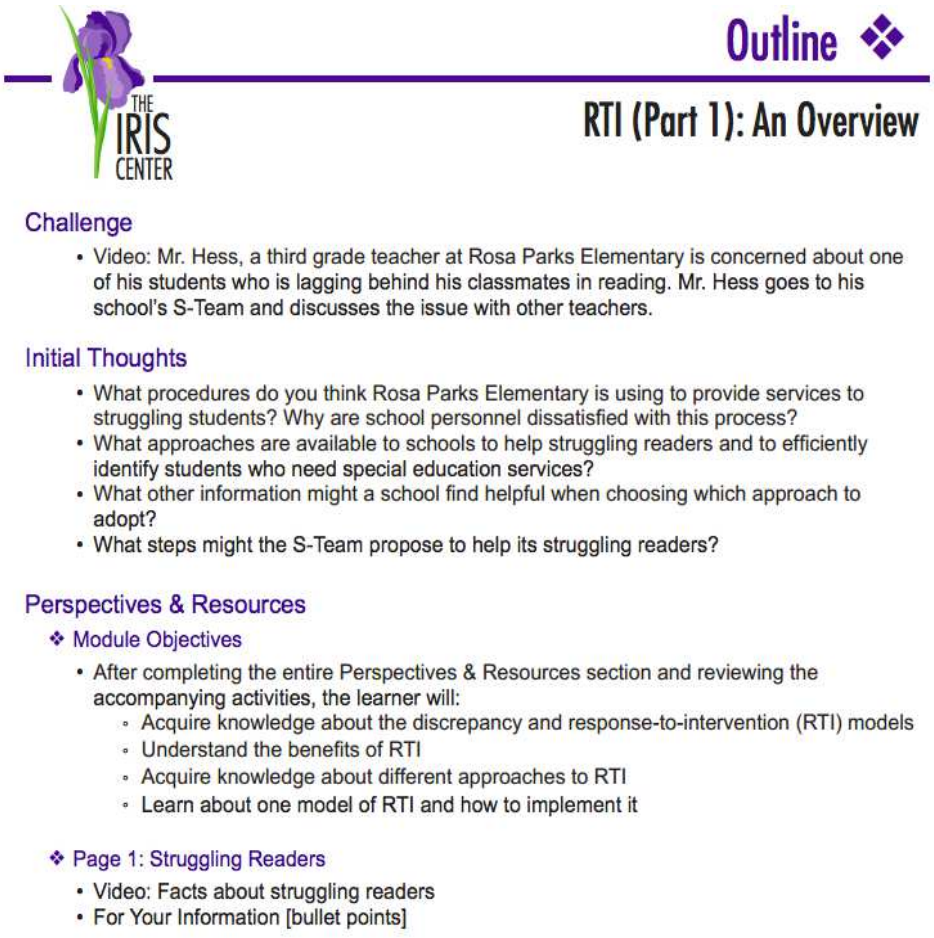


*Figure 4.* All IRIS training modules are similarly outlined

**Improve educators' use of formative assessments.** According to Hughes and Dexter (2011), "one of the cornerstones of the RTI model is that scientific, evidence-based Tier 1 instruction effectively eliminates inappropriate instruction as a reason for inadequate progress" (p. 5). During core classroom instruction, teachers must pay close attention to students' responses and choose how and when to support them. This involves noticing patterns of behavior and a deep understanding of the curriculum being taught (Johnston, 2010). Formative assessments are snapshots of students' learning that can help teachers identify concepts and skills that students have mastered or are still struggling to understand. In contrast to summative assessments that evaluate students' learning at the conclusion of an instructional period, formative assessments may include a variety of methods such as observations, thinking maps, or running records and provide teachers with immediate, explicit feedback to help students during the learning process (Glossary of Education Reform, 2014).

Progress monitoring is a formative assessment used on every tier in the RTI process (See Table 1) to determine if and how students are responding to instruction at an adequate rate (Kovaleski, 2013).

Table 1

*RTI Components*

| Tier | Core Instruction | All Students |
|---|---|---|
| Tier 1 | Universal screening (3 times per year) | All Students |
| | Monthly progress monitoring | At-risk students (~25%) |
| Tier 2 | Specialized interventions | ~10-20% of students |
| | Weekly progress monitoring | ~10-20% of students |
| Tier 3 | More intensive interventions and progress monitoring | ~5-10% of students |
| | Special education referral | ~2-7% of students |

Formative and summative assessments are vital to any educational system and direct the intervention process in the RTI framework (Hughes & Dexter, 2011; Johnston, 2010). While summative assessements are used to help identify students who score significantly below grade-level expectations, formative assessments are used to monitor students' progress and drive responsive instruction on every tiered level of instruction (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). Based on the concept that data drives instructional decisions, formative assessments used in both classroom instruction and supplemental interventions are used to determine whether students are responding to instruction at an adequate rate. In a survey of 42 schools, Mellard et al. (2009) found that problems with the implementation of RTI were directly related to inconsistencies in monitoring students' progress.

In the results from the qualitative case study conducted at two elementary schools in XYZ School District, I found that participants' understanding of how to use formative

assessments in the teaching process affected their perceptions of the RTI process. While neither Campus X nor Campus Y participants used recommended RTI procedures to identify students and provide targeted interventions, Campus X participants consistently used pre and postassessments, anecdotal records, and formative assessments to guide their instruction. Campus X participants had an overall more positive view, if more ambivilent, of the RTI committee. All three individual interviewees from Campus X used formative assessements during daily small group instruction and all commented that RTI made them more aware of their students' needs.

**IRIS online training modules: Classroom assessments.** Included in the RTI for Teachers Model Sequence, the two Classroom Assessment modules begin with short video clips of real-life educational problems told from a teacher's perspective. Multiple links embedded in the modules give teachers opportunities to learn more about formative assessments by watching brief interviews with classroom teachers and with leading experts in the field of RTI. The second Classroom Assessment module, Evaluating Reading Progress, targets how teachers can use data from formative assessments to determine if students are meeting established performance criteria

Educational practices and instructional strategies that are supported by scientific research targeting individual students' needs, such as direct instruction, small group targeted instruction, collaborative strategic reading, and communal teaching (Hoover & Love, 2011; NCRTI, 2014).According the National Center for RTI (2014), evidence-based instruction is differentiated teaching that is supported by scientific research, and includes: direct instruction, strategic reading practices, and reciprocal activities. "The

RTI framework supports the use of evidence-based practices on all tiers of instruction with particular emphasis on Tiers 2 and 3. Combined with research-based instruction on Tier 1, evidence-based practices can be viewed as those that show evidence of success based on data (Kovaleski, 2013).

In the data collected from case study participants, I found that school-wide supplemental intervention times were integrated into teachers' daily schedules at both study sites. Academic resources used for small group literacy intervention lessons were Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) kits (Fountas & Pinnell, 2015). IStation© and Think-Through Math were computer programs used by some teachers, but these were not used during intervention times. LLI kits provide scripted literacy instruction targeted at specific reading levels. However, most teachers were not trained on how to use the LLI kits, and instruction was used in a blanket approach, grouping students across the grade level regardless of RTI. Additionally, participants on both campuses responded that they viewed the campus RTI committee as a resource for additional strategies teachers could try in the classroom rather than a collaborative team of experts, resulting in wasted time discussing students and setting irrelevant goals.

**IRIS online training modules: Evidence-based practices.** The IRIS Center offers three training modules presented in a 3-part series on multiple aspects of evidence-based programs and practices. In the initial module, Evidence-Based Practices (Part 1): Identifying a Practice or Program, I discuss the importance of identifying and selecting evidence-based practices. In the second module, Implementing a Practice or Program with Fidelity, I define fidelity and discuss its importance in the RTI process. This

module also includes implementation procedures and risks of adapting programs and procedures. The third module, Evaluating Learner Outcomes and Fidelity, helps teachers evaluate the effectiveness of an evidence-based practice or program and gives examples of progress monitoring measures.

In addition to the recommended training modules, IRIS Center offers a plethora of information related to evidence-based learning (EBL) including an Evidence-Based Practice Summaries web page that provides summaries of research in multiple areas and links to research reports. Drop-down categories on the web page that show EBL practices and supporting research include Assessment, Behavior and Classroom Management, Content Instruction, Diversity, Early Intervention/Early Childhood, Learning Strategies, Mathematics, Reading/Literacy/Language Arts, RTI, School Improvement/Leadership, and Transition. I have included this web page on the list of RTI Resources in the PD plan.

**Improve and align campus administrators' understandings of RTI procedures and protocols**. According to the RTI Action Network (2014), building support for the implementation of an RTI model must first occur at district and campus administrative levels. Responsibilities of building principals should include (a) setting a vision for the problem-solving process, (b) supporting the development of expectations, (c) allocating necessary resources, (d) ensuring follow-up, (e) supporting program evaluation, and (f) monitoring staff support and school climate. This is supported by the TEA (2008) that stated, "The principal is the instructional leader of the school and so must be the leader in developing and implementing the RTI model" (p. 4). O'Conner and

Witter Freeman (2012) found that more than 700 school staff members from multiple schools responded to a survey about the RTI process on their campuses and nearly 50% of the school staff members did not feel campus administrators were committed to or knowledgeable of the RTI process. Therefore, campus administrator buy-in to RTI is critical in effecting teachers' positive perceptions of the RTI process (Stuart, Rinaldi, & Higgins-Averill, 2011).

In the findings from the local study, the participants' perceptions of RTI were both positively and negatively influenced by expectations set by campus administrators and by goals set by campus RTI committees. While neither principal was directly involved in the RTI process, instructional expectations for Tier 1 and Tier 2 were evident. As previously noted in Sections 1 and 2, district recommendations supported APs as campus RTI facilitators. However, campus principals had the autonomy to decide who was responsible for RTI implementation on their respective campuses, resulting in significant differences in RTI understanding and protocol. For campuses in which APs were the designated RTI facilitators, a high AP turnover rate resulted in constantly changing forms and protocols that reflected the current AP's unique understanding of RTI.

**IRIS online training modules: RTI for administrators and effective school practices.** Included in the 91 resources related to school improvement and leadership on the IRIS website, are 16 training modules. The two modules selected for the PD plan was RTI: Considerations for School Leaders and Effective School Practices: Promoting Collaboration and Monitoring Students' Academic Achievement. Like the training

modules designed for teachers, the modules designed for school administrators use the STAR legacy model method of inquiry and begin with relevant challenge scenarios. Learning objectives for all RTI modules include an understanding the stages of infusing the RTI approach in a school and identifying factors that contribute to the effective implementation of RTI. As this module is connected to the RTI for Teachers Module Sequence, it would serve as a bridge between teachers and members of the RTI committee. The Effective School Practices Module includes a discussion of the roles and responsibilities of the school principal in the RTI process and promotes collaboration among all stakeholders. The PD plan's implementation timeline recommends that principals and APs view teachers' and administrators' modules during the month of July and meet with RTI committee members to develop a campus timeline prior to school starting. In this way, there can be an established campus infrastructure that aligns with national RTI guidelines (Allington, 2009).

## Project Description

### Needed Resources, Existing Supports, and Potential Barriers

**Needed resources**. According to Dufour and Marzano (2009), teachers are more likely to apply skills and knowledge learned from PD when they have the resources and support to help them be successful. District and campus administrators' buy-in and ongoing support are key resources in successfully implementing the RTI program (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). VanderHeyden and Tilly (2010) also showed the importance of administrators' buy-in and leadership in effective RTI implementation. Another resource necessary for the project's success is time. Guskey (2000) stated that "one of the most

crucial aspects of organization support and change is the provision of adequate time for professional development" (p. 162). As noted in the initial review of literature, time for ongoing and relevant learning is critical for teachers' buy-in and fidelity to any new program such as RTI (Carlson et al., 2011). Financial resources needed for the project's implementation are minimal due to its universal online format. However, financial resources could be required for training hourly support staff.

**Existing supports.** In the XYZ School District, campus dyslexia/literacy interventionists are trained in components of RTI and are members of campus RTI committees (Executive Director Curriculum and Instruction, personal communication, July 3, 2013). Campus APs also receive initial training in RTI and are invited to voluntarily participate in a district-level professional learning community led by a district administrator (Principal, personal communication, July, 2013). In addition to the support offered by campus personnel, XYZ School District provides online training to all professional staff through an online learning academy. As district educators and administrators are already familiar with this training format, initiating and sustaining the PD plan can be easily facilitated. I met with the district's elementary RTI coordinator and presented the study's findings and the proposed project. The coordinator appeared interested in beginning the implementation timeline in June and July with district and campus administrators.

**Potential barriers**. Limiting resources necessary for successful project implementation could present potential barriers. A lack of buy-in to all or part of the PD plan from district and campus administrators could adversely affect successful program

implementation. Additionally, introducing the project to district and campus administrators in August rather than June or July could delay the implementation timeline and adversely affect the understanding of and fidelity to the PD plan. Although the project requires limited financial resources, district and campus administrators submitted fiscal budgets for the coming year months ago. Finally, campus and district planning for PD in the upcoming year is done in the spring, requiring a full year's delay to initiate project implementation. If introduced in the fall of the school year, it will be necessary for the district RTI coordinators to maintain an understanding and the enthusiasm to promote the project the following year.

**Proposed Implementation and Timetable**

After meeting with the district administrator responsible for initiating the PD plan to gain insight into implementation possibilities, I developed a timeline intended to systematically improve learners' knowledge of RTI and related skills over 8 months. Written for district personnel, campus administrators, and teachers, the timeline's slow integration of RTI knowledge and skills is intended to facilitate gradual and sustainable program implementation resulting in eventual district-wide reform (Rinaldi et al., 2010; Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2012).

Commencing in June, the timeline recommends that district personnel view all IRIS modules in order to integrate them into district trainings. By embedding IRIS modules within district trainings that are available to all staff, district administrators will be able to use learners' feedback to formatively assess and guide the project's implementation. Responding to the study's finding that teachers were confused and

frustrated by changing RTI forms, I recommend that district administrators review and simplify district RTI forms during the summer months before school begins. I also recommend that district administrators inform school principals about the RTI modules in July to allow principals time to view modules related to successful school practices. In addition to the timeline to systematically improve teachers' and administrators' knowledge of RTI, the PD plan provides XYZ School District administrators with a list of RTI resources and frequently asked questions about RTI. When posted on the district's RTI webpage, these resources and information could support educators' understanding of RTI.

**Roles and Responsibilities of Administrators and Educators**

According to Grimaldi and Robertson (2011), successful RTI models require ongoing communication and the collaboration of all stakeholders in a school or district. Castro-Villarreal et al. (2014) concured that school teams and administrative leadership are critical for teacher buy-in and fidelity to implementation. Therefore, three levels of support are needed to effect the recommended changes in RTI protocol and understanding in XYZ School District.

As leadership from administration sets the climate for teachers' buy-in and fidelity of implementation (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014), district personnel must first implement and promote the plan by creating district training modules on the district's online learning academy. To sustain the PD plan, district administrators must maintain training modules on the website, promote RTI trainings to campus administrators and teachers; update current data and resources on the district RTI webpage as they become

available; and formatively assess plan implementation using data and feedback collected in blogs, meetings, and follow-up face-to-face trainings.

Campus administrators also have roles and responsibilities. As school principals in XYZ School District have autonomy over the needs and expectations of campus educators, they must create a school climate that is conducive to RTI and work collaboratively with the campus RTI committee to plan, implement, and maintain clear and systematic protocols. They must also monitor teachers' understanding of RTI through ongoing communication.

As teachers' knowledge and use of scientifically based classroom practices are the most important factors in effective RTI implementation (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2007; Hall & Mahoney, 2013), it is essential for teachers to participate in the online trainings. Additional responsiblities include collaborating with teammates, colleagues, and support staff to ensure program integrity and using skills such as SGI and formative assessments in daily classroom instruction.

## Project Evaluation Plan

Responding to the findings from the qualitative inquiry conducted at XYZ School District, the attached PD plan is intended to improve educators' and administrators' knowledge and skills in the RTI process. As many PD programs have little long-term effect on participants' fidelity to program implementation (Cooter & Perkins, 2011), evaluating the short- and long-term effects of this PD plan are crucial to its sustainability. The project's intended outcomes are presented as the PD plan's goals: (a) improve educators' and administrators' understanding of the RTI process, (b) improve educators'

understanding and use of formative assessments, (c) improve educators' understanding and use of evidence-based interventions, and (d) improve and align campus administrators' understanding of RTI protocols.

Guskey (2000) suggested evaluating PD on five levels: (a) assess participants' reactions, (b) assess participants' learning, (c) evaluate organizational support and change, (d) assess participants' application of new knowledge, and (d) evaluate student learning outcomes. As the many RTI evaluation models and checklists available to school districts (NCLD, 2014; NCRTI , 2013) have the potential to create confusion, the in the PD plan, I recommend that district administrators conduct ongoing formative assessments by compiling participants' responses to the evaluations included in every IRIS training module. Using The STAR legacy model format, modules include interactive learning checks and conclude with a review and an assessment.

In the implementation timeline included in the project, I recommend that district administrators create blogs spots at the end of every district module in LOLA to assess participants' feedback and learning. Also recommended are monthly meetings to assess necessary organizational support and change. To evaluate the effectiveness of the project at the end of the school year, a summative evaluation that is quantitative in nature and evidenced by a numeric score (Trochim, 2009) could be conducted using a district-wide online survey or by analyzing trends in learners' blog posts. Using online survey software such as SurveyGizmo, SurveyMonkey, or TypeForm, district administrators could send simple surveys to teachers to determine their depth of knowledge about RTI and to determine current attitudes or beliefs about the RTI process. The Florida

Department of Education (2013) offers free evaluation tools, manuals, and reports. This website is included in the list of RTI resources in the PD plan. Interpreting the data and comparing them to the project's initial goals would help administrators plan for future professional development. Figure 5 shows the STAR legacy training module.

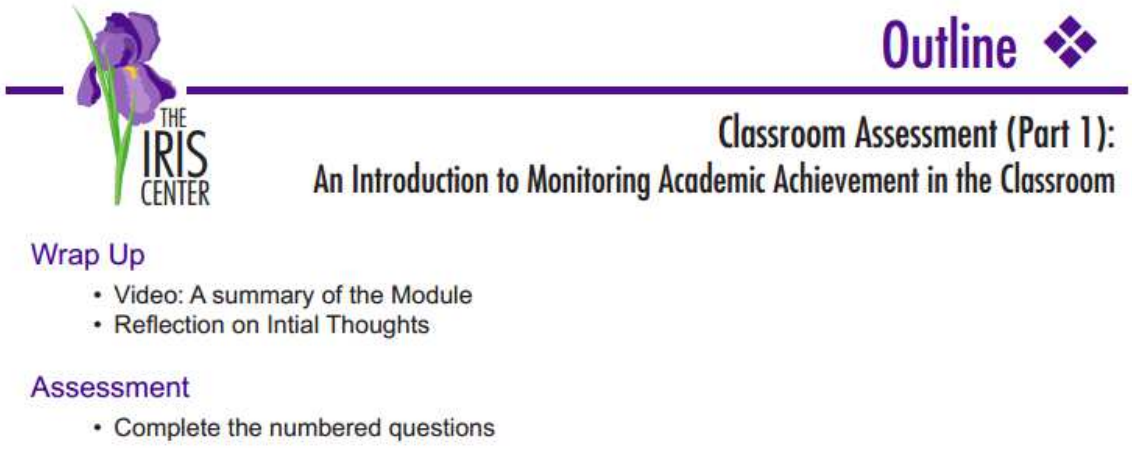


*Figure 5*. Every STAR legacy module training module ends with an assessment

The PD plan was developed in response to classroom teachers' perceptions of RTI. As such, training modules were selected to address intended learning outcomes for teachers, campus administrators, and district administrators. As successful implementation of the project affects all stakeholders, it is important that the IRIS training modules selected for administrators include components addressing parent-school partnerships, community involvement, and an action plan to gain school-wide commitment. Additional evaluative measures that include parents and support staff are outlined in these modules.

# Project Implications

## Social Change

In findings from a 3-year study, Rinaldi et al. (2010) showed that the successful implementation of RTI models resulted in strong collaborative structures, PD, and coshared leadership. Responding to the need for PD in RTI evidenced in the local study's findings, the PD plan could positively affect social change in the XYZ School District through improved collaboration between all stakeholders, ongoing PD, and increased appreciation of the roles of all staff members in the RTI framework (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). Teachers and administrators would benefit from the increased communication and collaboration required by the online learning modules and outlined in the implementation timeline (IRIS Center, 2013). Also, the knowledge and skills acquired from IRIS's singular evidence-based source could improve and align educators' and administrators' shared understanding of the overarching RTI process and their respective roles in it (Cooter & Perkins, 2011). Better informed teaching practices would benefit student learning and improve the overall climate of the school (Hoover, 2011). As teacher-parent communication and collaboration are included in the PD plan, more parent involvement would also be an expected benefit (Kozleski & Huber, 2010; Orosco & Klingner, 2010).

## Local and Far Reaching Implications

The PD plan could establish a foundation and framework for a sustained RTI program in the XYZ School District. The project offers a solution to teachers' and administrators' limited understanding of the RTI process as revealed through the

qualitative case study conducted with local teachers. The IRIS Center's PD modules recommended in the PD plan are evidence-based, user friendly, and easily implemented. If modules are presented to teachers and administrators in a district-wide training format, this project has the potential to impact local stakeholders' knowledge of RTI and possibly result in district-wide reform.

As sustained PD plays a role in all teachers and administrators' understanding of RTI processes and procedures (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014), the PD plan created for this local study could be used by other school districts. While the project's goals and implementation timeline were created in response to findings from the local study, the online training modules and RTI resources contained in the PD plan are universally relevant and could be used by any school district. With sustained fidelity of implementation, this PD plan could increase the odds of successful RTI implementation in any school district (Spear-Swerling & Cheesman, 2012)

## Conclusion

In Section 3, I presented a description of the project and the project's goals. A rationale justifying why the project genre was chosen and how the content of the project addresses the problem was based on the data analysis in Section 2. A review of the literature on how current research guided the development of the project precedes a description of resources, potential supports and barriers, implementation measures, and the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders and concludes with a discussion of the project's evaluation plan, possible social change implications, and potential local and far reaching impact of the project. In Section 4, I describe the project's strengths and limitations,

suggest alternative ways to view and address the problem, and provide an analysis of what was learned. Reflections on the importance of the project are also included, as well as possible implications, applications, and future research.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

## Introduction

In this section, I discuss the project's strengths and limitations as a potential solution to the local problem. I also examine other ways of looking at the problem and discuss alternative solutions. Reflecting on the development of the project, I analyze what I learned about scholarship, project development, leadership, and change. I also reflect on what I learned about myself as a scholar practitioner. Finally, I discuss the project's local and far reaching significance and suggest possible implications, applications, and future research.

## Project Strengths and Limitations

### Strengths

There is a need for ongoing PD related to the concepts and skills necessary to effectively implement RTI strategies in the classroom (Carlson et al., 2011). Participants from the local study supported this research with responses such as Teacher 3's comment, "Sometimes we just guess." The project's culminating PD plan provides school district administrators with an overview of RTI and insight into the national and local challenges of PD. It also presents administrators with guidelines for credible solutions that can be easily implemented. Therefore, a strength of this project is the informative and holistic nature of the PD plan, which can be posted on the district's RTI webpage.

The online training modules recommended in the PD plan were selected to address the project's four goals that were based on the findings from the local study. A second strength of the project is that the proposed solution responds to the identified

needs of educators and administrators in the XYZ School District and is supported by local data and current research. According to Knowles (2012), a learner's need to know, prior experience, and motivation are imperative for adult learning to happen (p. 3). A third strength of the project is that it is delivered by experts in RTI (O'Connor & Witter Freeman, 2012). After conducting an exhaustive search of possible sources, I selected the training modules developed by the IRIS Center (2010) because they were developed and presented by current leaders in RTI research. As discussed in Section 3, the IRIS Center is a part of Vanderbilt University and is funded through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). All IRIS training modules include interviews with leading experts in the field of RTI who gave deeper insight into the training content. A fourth strength of the project is its digital format. Technology "directly caters to adults' desire to be self-directed in their learning" and allows them to "tailor the learning to their real-world problems" (Knowles et al., 2011, p. 242). All IRIS training modules use the STAR legacy model cycle of inquiry to ensure that learners receive consistent, relevant information that is challenging and user friendly. When placed on the district's Online Learning Academy, IRIS modules could be easily accessed by educators and administrators for district PD credit. A fifth strength of the project is that it helps district administrators do more with less. Currently, the RTI program is combined with other district departments in the XYZ School District and is the shared responsibility of two district coordinators. With limited time and multiple responsibilities, these coordinators are not able to provide the PD needed to all educators and administrators. All IRIS training modules are free for

universal use and can be easily linked to the district's online learning academy. District coordinators will be able to deliver a high quality, consistent program with minimum effort. Finally, the online PD plan provides educators and administrators in the XYZ School District with high quality trainings through one credible source. All stakeholders will share a common knowledge of RTI that will decrease the amount of confusion surrounding RTI. This overall increase of base knowledge may lead to new questions and conversations and eventual district-wide reform (Applebaum, 2009).

In addition to the IRIS training modules, the PD plan contains a list of resources related to RTI, including evidence-based intervention strategies, suggestions for universal screenings, and online sources for formative and summative assessments. I also included a list of questions that are frequently asked by classroom teachers related to RTI implementation strategies. These two resources can be posted on the district's RTI web page with or apart from the PD plan to help educators in the XYZ School District respond to the needs of struggling learners.

**Limitations**

A primary cause of failure for any type of PD is the lack of follow-up and support (Hoover, 2011). A limitation of this project could be the integrity of its accessibility. While support from district and campus administrators in the XYZ School District is critical, teachers' and administrators' ability to access the IRIS training modules is equally important. Should the training modules become unavailable due to changes in the IRIS Center's website or should there be changes in funding resulting in usage fees, the project could not be implemented as written. Such changes would interrupt the

fidelity of the PD plan. Just as fidelity of implementation is an area of continuing concern in RTI, so is the fidelity of ongoing high quality PD (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012).

The expediency of the project's recommended timeline is a second factor that could limit project implementation. As the timeline spans 10 months and includes multiple steps for district administrators, campus administrators, and teachers, it is likely that one or more of the implementation recommendations will need to be adjusted. Recommendations in the Project Evaluation portion of the PD plan include posting a blog with the timeline on the district's RTI web page so educators and administrators can provide formative and summative feedback.

A third limitation of the project is that the recommended guidelines do not extend past initial implementation. District personnel responsible for the project's initial implementation will need to continually monitor links to recommended resources and evaluate the project's successes and challenges in the summer to continually educate and challenge all stakeholders.

## Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

According to findings from the qualitative inquiry conducted in the XYZ School District, there was a need for quality, sustained PD in areas related to RTI. While the recommended PD plan addresses the problems identified in the study, it is only one of several possible solutions. One alternative to the digital PD modules could be a district RTI manual or field guide segmented into sections such as formative assessments, protocols and forms, and intervention strategies. Available to teachers and RTI committee members in every campus's professional library, and on every campus

administrator's bookshelf, the manual could be a readily accessible "go-to" resource that would help align all stakeholders' understanding of RTI purpose and protocols. A second way to address the problem would be for district administrators to create training videos within the district. During a group interview, one teacher mentioned how training videos would help teachers' understanding of RTI. However, while creating in-house videos would eliminate potential limitations, additional staff members and time would be needed.

## Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change Scholarship

The process of becoming a scholar is a transformative journey from being a life-long consumer of knowledge in the classroom to a creator of knowledge through original research. McCambly (2013) defined a scholar as "a trusted and accomplished expert, a creator of knowledge who can integrate disparate data and concepts to innovate and reach new conclusions" (p. 3). Becoming a scholar is not easy. To successfully transition from a consumer to a producer mentality, a scholarly aspirant must make a paradigm shift in thinking to become an independent thinker. An important first step towards this shift to independence is the process of writing a dissertation. The process of deciding on a topic, creating a framework to complete the research, and writing the final thesis requires a student be able to think critically and independently.

As a doctor of education program candidate at Walden University, I aspired to become a scholar practitioner by integrating scholarly research with my expertise as an educator (Walden University, 2010). The duality of my roles as a doctoral student and an educational practitioner challenged me to synergize theory with application and changed

my perceptions of teaching and learning. I learned to be a reflective practitioner as every semester of doctoral classwork presented new challenges in research, technology, and writing. As my writing, grammar, and research skills improved, so did my love of learning, resulting in my recently accepting a postdoctoral research position at a major university.

**Project Development**

Just as the road to scholarship is a personal journey, a doctoral study contributes to the professional community and affects positive social change (Walden University, 2010). As a participant in Walden's Teacher Leadership Program, I looked for a research topic would challenge me to " create new knowledge dedicated to the improvement of social conditions, and to positively impact society by putting that knowledge into practice, by modeling [my] learning through action, and by being civically engaged" (Walden University, 2010, p. 5).

As a bilingual literacy interventionist/RTI facilitator in the XYZ School District, I was aware of the need for additional research on the topic of RTI. Therefore, the process of developing a project that would positively impact my educational community began with a research question. The ensuing research allowed me to help my colleagues and campus administrators to better understand the purpose of RTI resulting in a school-wide system of support.

Conducting a qualitative inquiry with 10 teachers at two local elementary schools gave me a deeper understanding of teachers' and administrators' understanding of the RTI process in my school district. Based on the findings from the case study, I created a

PD plan recommending a district-wide PD plan. As I researched possible solutions to problems that had emerged from the data that I had personally collected analyzed, I understood what it meant to be a scholar and to "integrate disparate data and concepts to innovate and reach new conclusions" (McCambly, 2013, p. 3).

Researching the many possible evaluative measures for the project required me to synergize theory with application. As a theorist, I examined the formative and summative evaluations contained within the recommended training modules and confirmed their validity. As a practitioner, I looked at how the project could be implemented and sustained. In addition to the PD plan, the PD plan contained two resources to help the educators and administrators in the XYZ School District to better understand the RTI process. I researched and recommended potential formative and summative measures to help district personnel maintain and guide the project in years to come. The district administrators in charge of RTI in the XYZ School District were enthusiastic about the potential impact the project could have in the district. Pending approval, they plan to begin implementation in the coming months.

**Leadership and Change**

I have become a scholar practitioner leader over the past several years. Bailey (2014) defined scholarly practitioner leaders as educators who are able to understand the "why" behind the "what" and apply theory to practice. In contrast to many school leaders who rely on the organizational practices of administrative science, scholarly practitioner leaders are able to lead with a deeper understanding brought about by research. While conducting the project study, I observed and collaborated with transactional and

transformative leaders in different educational roles. Interacting with these leaders helped me define my own leadership style and challenged me to understand and appreciate the strengths found in every leadership style.

Purposeful change requires time, reflection, and collaboration (Greenfield et al., 2010). Reflecting on the research and development process I used to create this project, I understand how time and reflection are necessary to create new knowledge and how collaboration ensures credibility. Just as I experienced these components of change when becoming a scholar practitioner, I know that I must also include them in project implementation. As I discussed with the district coordinator, formative and summative evaluations are key factors in the success of the project. Hence, district administrators must allow time for the project to take root, continually reflect on the feedback, and collaborate with each other and all levels of stakeholders.

**Analysis of Self as a Scholar**

To be a scholar means to continuously explore what has worked and what has not worked, no matter how difficult uncovering the truth may be (Lewis, 2015). While this sentiment could be perceived as a never ending cycle offering no definitive answers, I have come to appreciate it as the true nature of research. As I have evolved from being an educator practitioner to a scholar practitioner leader, I have a deeper and different understanding of what it means to be a lifelong learner. Years of scholarly coursework culminating in my creating new knowledge from original research have made me a self-reliant and independent thinker. To the occasional dismay of my campus administrators, I have learned to continually question the known and to look at new ideas from multiple

perspectives. As I begin work as a postdoctoral fellow, I look forward to new scholarly challenges and opportunities to conduct additional research.

**Analysis of Self as a Practitioner**

My continual quest for new challenges and learning in 17 years as a professional educator has resulted in a variety of degrees, certifications, and teaching positions. The process of earning every degree and certification and each new teaching experience broadened my awareness, deepened my understanding, and challenged me to keep learning. Such was my experience as I pursued my educational doctorate at Walden University. While some may view earning an educational doctorate as having reached a peak in learning, true scholars thirsty for new knowledge may view this degree as a summit. As a bilingual educator, I have broadened and deepened my understandings of ELLs in the RTI process. As a reading specialist, dyslexia interventionist, and Reading Recovery/Descubriendo la Lectura teacher, I have helped teachers understand how high quality literacy instruction is integral to the RTI process. As a principal, I have collaborated with campus and district administrators to create campus RTI protocols and improve district-wide understandings of RTI. Hence, the pursuit of scholarship has holistically impacted my work as an educator practitioner.

**Analysis of Self as a Project Developer**

I did not understand that I would be responsible for developing a project until I finished the data analysis of my qualitative inquiry. I must have missed the memo or slept through the meeting. After recovering from my initial shock, I reflected on the new challenge in a scholarly manner and appreciated the opportunity it gave me as a scholar

practitioner to validate Walden University's (2010) mission of effecting positive social change (p. 4). I realized that the project provided the opportunity to create a tangible means of solving the problems identified in the local study.

I found that developing the project was easier than writing the study's initial literature review due to my improved background knowledge on the topic and personal relationship to the local problem. After transforming the study's findings into the project's goals, I was able to conduct an exhaustive search of the literature using a more focused lens. As a developing scholar practitioner, I appreciated and was humbled by the expertise of the scholar practitioners who created the IRIS training modules recommended in my PD plan. I will use the skills I learned developing this project as I move into my new position as a postdoctoral fellow. As a future liaison between public schools and educational research, I will be able to connect theory to application using a real-life experience.

The overarching purpose of RTI is to reduce the number of students referred for special education testing and to improve overall student learning. As successful RTI implementation requires educators to shift the way they think about special education referrals and traditional instructional strategies, understanding how they perceive the RTI process is important. The qualitative study I conducted in a large southwestern school district contributes to the growing body of research on teachers' views of RTI. The PD project I created in response to the study's findings can be implemented in any school district across the country to improve educators' and administrators' understanding of RTI.

In addition to learning about how to conduct a credible qualitative study, how to research, and how to understand the doctoral process, I have learned that there is a need for further qualitative research in many areas related to RTI such as RTI strategies and assessments used for ELLs and teachers' understanding and use of formative assessments. Additionally, my thinking about RTI has changed as a result of the research I have conducted over the past year. Limited procedural guidance on how to implement RTI has created a likelihood of implementation challenges, warranting further research.

## Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Use

This project study has implications for the XYZ School District and for the broader educational community. The findings from the study contribute to the limited research related to teachers' perceptions of RTI (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Fuchs et al., 2012). Created to improve educators' and administrators' understanding of the RTI process and related practices and protocols, the project can be applied as written or can be changed to meet the needs of the school district. District administrators could integrate components of the project into new teacher and new administrator training or offer continued PD with other training modules created by the IRIS Center. Additional resources could also be added to the initial resource list presented in the PD plan as they become available, and the list of frequenty asked questions could serve as an exemplar on a district blog spot.

Future research that stems from this RTI study could contribute to the initial body of knowledge revealed through this qualitative inquiry in the XYZ School District. Research topics such as understanding or comparing the perceptions of secondary

teachers or administrators could provide additional information that would significantly benefit the district. As there is an ongoing need for PD related to RTI ( Carlson et al., 2011; Fuchs et al., 2012; Hoover, 2011), future use of the project's digital PD plan has potential in the local school district and in school districts across the country.

## Conclusion

In this project study, I explored how elementary classroom teachers' perceptions of RTI affected classroom instruction. A qualitative inquiry was conducted with 10 participants at two study sites. In the data analysis, I found a need for PD in several areas related to RTI, and goals for a PD plan were created based on the study's findings. Recommendations for implementation and evaluation guidelines were presented in a PD plan.

In Section 4, I discussed the strengths and limitations of the project and examined alternative ways of looking at it and its potential solutions. I reflected on what I learned about scholarship, project development, and leadership and change as they related to both the doctoral learning process and as they related to me as an evolving scholar practitioner. Finally, I suggested possible implications, applications, and directions for future use. It is my belief that the systematic approach to the qualitative inquiry conducted in the XYZ School District provided a foundation for this relevant and meaningful project solution.

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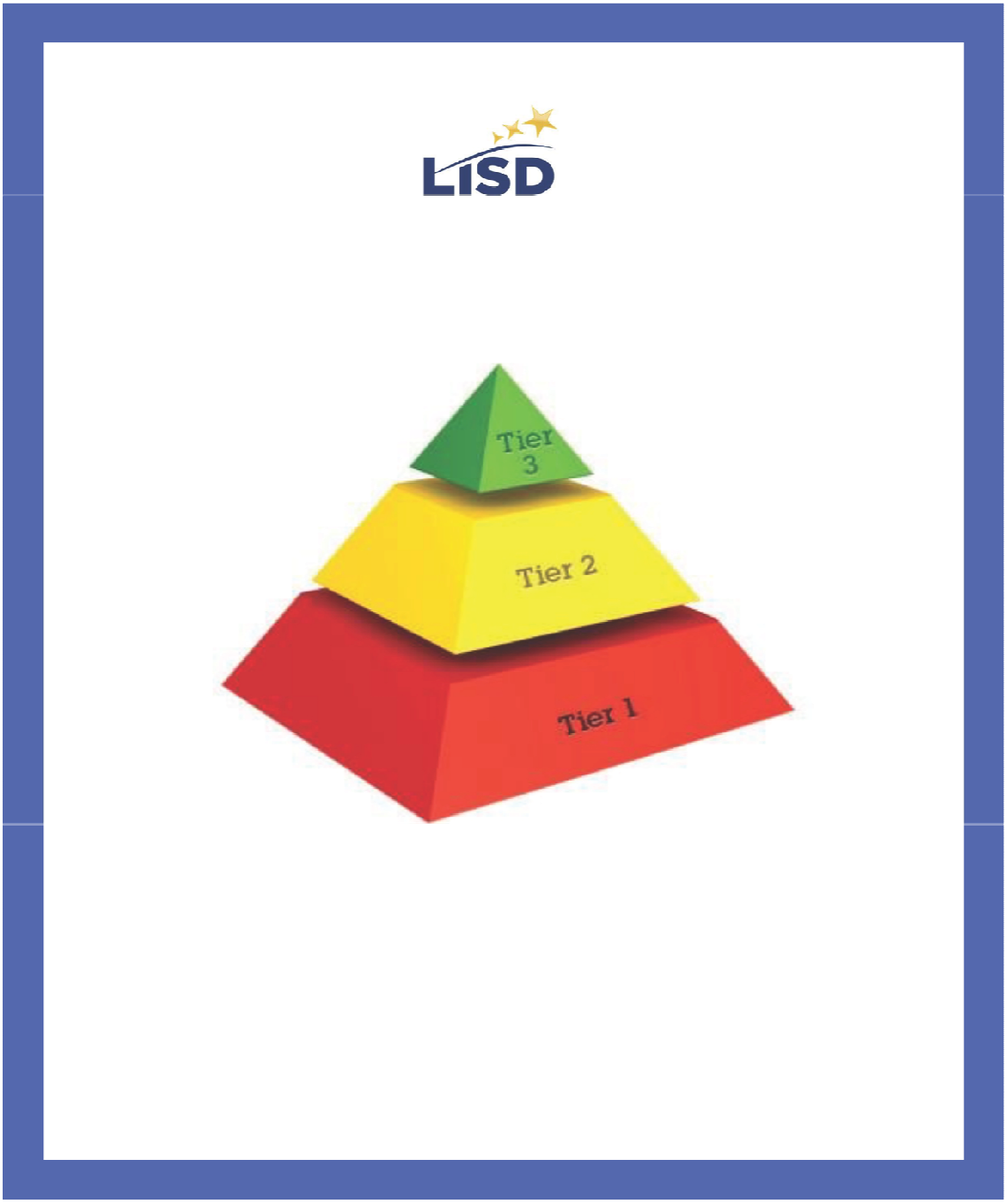
Appendix A: The Project



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## Introduction

This report and proposed professional development (PD) plan is the result of a qualitative case study conducted by a Walden University doctoral student in partial fulfillment of Project Study requirements. To better understand how elementary classroom teachers' perceptions of RTI affect core classroom instruction, the researcher interviewed ten classroom teachers at two elementary schools in LISD. Findings showed the need for consistent professional development in RTI for teachers and administrators. Based on findings from the study, the researcher created the following PD plan using digital training modules developed by The IRIS Center at Vanderbilt University in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Education.

## RTI: An Overview

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a federally mandated educational reform effort designed to improve teaching and learning in all U.S. schools (Wixson, 2011). Written to identify and support students who are at risk of failing, the RTI program is intended to: (a) ensure high-quality classroom instruction and, (b) provide additional instruction (interventions) to students who need it (NCRTI, 2012). In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) required teachers use scientifically research-based instruction in the classroom to ensure optimal learning in the classroom. The 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) also referred to scientifically –based instruction, but from focused on supplemental support for struggling individuals rather than classroom instruction. While founded on NCLB and IDEA, the RTI program is also included in the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (NRCLD) published guidelines (2007) and in The President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) to reduce special education referrals.

Often misperceived as a lengthier alternative to traditional Special Education testing, RTI has been called, "The Road to Special Education" (Allington, 2009; NRCLD, 2007, Wixson, 2011). To the contrary, RTI is a pro-active process designed to reduce the number of student referrals by: (a) ensuring that teachers provide evidence-based classroom instruction that is differentiated to meet students' needs, (b) identifying students with learning gaps early using a universal screening process, (c) providing targeted and relevant direct instruction to close learning gaps, and (e) monitoring students' progress (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012).

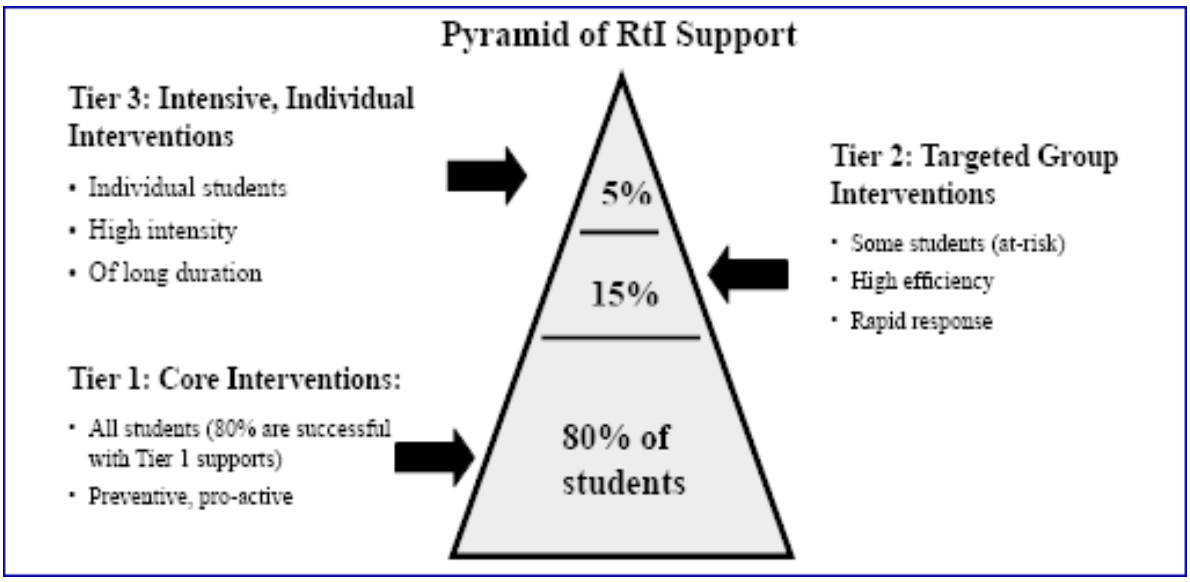



**Figure 1**: Pyramid of RTI Support (Deconde Johnson, 2015

### The RTI Model

The RTI process is a continuum of levels, or tiers, that vary in intensity according to students' needs. As shown in Figure 1, the RTI framework is represented as 3-tiered triangle. The model shows that 80 % of students should respond to the evidence-based, differentiated instruction provided in a general education classroom (tier 1). Only 5% of students in any given classroom should need intensive 1:1 direct instruction that may eventually lead to identification of specific learning disabilities (SLDs) through special education testing. Students identified as needing additional instruction in specific areas of skills move up the continuum to receive additional instruction until their identified learning gaps or deficits has been filled. Students who demonstrate proficiency in knowledge or skills after receiving interventions have "responded to the intervention", and move back down the continuum.

### Tier 1: Core Classroom Instruction

Tier 1 is the universal level of general classroom instruction where highly qualified teachers use scientifically research-based practices such as daily small-group instruction and differentiation to meet the needs of all students. On tier 1, student progress is monitored frequently using both universal screenings (3 times per year) and ongoing formative assessments such as running records and weekly quizzes to ensure that all students are challenged at their current ability levels. Approximately 80% of students are successful, or "respond" to instruction that is preventative, pro-active, and learner-centered. Students who are unable to demonstrate mastery of skills at a level determined by the district (cut points) may need more direct instruction in the classroom or additional instruction to fill learning gaps. A campus committee of educators and administrators with expertise in relevant academic and behavioral areas (RTI committee) help classroom teachers analyze student data from

universal screenings, formative assessments, and teacher observations to decide if additional targeted instruction is needed.

### Tier 2: Additional Targeted Instruction (Interventions)

Approximately 15% of all students in any school may have difficulty learning in a general education classroom due to lack of language, socio-economic disadvantages, cultural differences, or SLDs. Tier 2 instruction targets the learning gaps identified by the universal screenings, formative assessments, and teacher observations on tier 1. Recommended as lasting 8-12 weeks, these "cycles" of additional instruction may be given by the classroom teacher or by a support teacher with expertise in the subject (e.g. Reading Specialist). On tier 2, students' progress is monitored frequently to show if and how students are "responding to the intervention". Students who are able to demonstrate mastery of the targeted skills and "responded" to tier 2 interventions move back down the RTI continuum and continue tier 1 classroom instruction. Students who do not respond, despite consistent direct tier 2 instruction and ongoing tier 1 instruction may participate in another tier 2 intervention cycle or may move to tier 3 to receive even more intense support. Led by a knowledgeable administrator, the RTI committee reviews the data collected during each tier 2 intervention cycle to decide the best course of action for every student.

### Tier 3: Intensive Additional Targeted Instruction (Interventions)

Students who do not respond to one or more cycles of targeted tier 2 interventions combined with tier 1 classroom instruction may need the intensive "last line of defense" support provided by tier 3 interventions. Only 5% of all students in any school should need tier 3 instruction. Like tier 2, tier 3 interventions are taught in addition to core classroom instruction. However, on tier 3 students work individually with highly skilled interventionists to receive intensive, direct, and systematic instruction. Tier 3 intervention cycles may be "of long duration" as noted in Figure 1, or of shorter duration, as determined by the campus RTI committee. Data collected during tier 3 interventions is added to tier 2 and tier 1 data to help the RTI committee determine if special education testing is needed.

## RTI in the Classroom

Responding to NCLB's mandate that teachers use scientifically research-based practices in the classroom and IDEA's multiple references to scientifically based instruction, the RTI program is grounded in and dependent upon effective instructional practices in the general education classroom. Using a scientific approach to learning requires classroom teachers to assess and analyze students' knowledge and skills, matching the curriculum (content) and instructional strategies (process) to students' needs. While traditional whole-group classroom instruction meets the learning needs of many students, other students who struggle are at risk of failing. The research-based instructional practices in the RTI approach include daily small-group instruction (SGI), flexible grouping, and formative assessments to help teachers differentiate and analyze students' progress. These instructional practices give teachers insight into students' rates of growth and allow them to more quickly identify students who struggle. The sooner struggling students are identified and given appropriate support, the faster they can respond to the support and be successful in the classroom. Students who are identified early, provided interventions, and continue to struggle may be referred for special education services to receive appropriate support. As 40% of students identified with SLDs (specific learning disabilities) do not need special education services (Cicek, 2012), RTI's learner-centered classroom instruction that includes SGI, flexible grouping, and formative assessments provides a critical foundation for student success.

Researchers have shown that the quality of teachers' core classroom instruction is the most important factor in successful student outcomes (Abbot & Wills, 2012) and that teachers' understandings of the RTI process are vital to successful RTI implementation (Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor, & Cardarelli, 2010). Therefore, improving teachers' knowledge and skills of RTI processes would positively impact student learning and reduce the number of inappropriate special education referrals.

The RTI program requires educators to provide appropriate instruction, make decisions about additional support, interpret assessment data, identify and solve learning problems, and collaborate with various personnel to ensure students' learning success (Abbot & Wills, 2012; Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Johnston, 2010). As teachers feel they lack the necessary skills to effectively implement the RTI process (Carlson, et al.; Hall & Mahoney, 2013), ongoing professional development in program implementation and procedural expectations is critical.

Professional Development Plan

## Local Study: A Qualitative Inquiry

### Local Problem

Changing student demographics and state educational budget cuts over the past ten years have required Texas school district administrators to do more with less, resulting in fewer district personnel with multiple responsibilities. When first introduced to LISD campus administrators in 2006, RTI was designated as a general education program and was subsidized by temporary stimulus funds. Subsequent years' funding became the responsibility of campus principals.

Currently, RTI in LISD is the joint responsibility of two district coordinators who supervise multiple departments in primary and secondary schools. District guidelines recommend that assistant principals oversee the RTI process on their respective campuses. However, campus principals are responsible for staffing and deciding how the program is implemented. This has resulted in differences between campuses in how teachers understand and implement the RTI process. Additionally, the high turnover rate of assistant principals has resulted continually changing campus protocols and increased confusion.

### Case Study

To better understand teachers' knowledge and perceptions of the RTI process and how RTI influences their classroom instruction, in 2015 a qualitative inquiry was conducted at two elementary schools in LISD. Ten teachers participated in group and individual interviews conducted over a four-week period and participants' progress-monitoring logs were used to corroborate data.

### Research Questions

1. How do elementary classroom teachers' perceive the Response to Intervention process affecting core-classroom instruction?
2. How are teachers' perceptions of RTI influenced by professional development?
3. How are teachers' perceptions of RTI influenced by administrative expectations and ongoing support?
4. What do teachers perceive to be the benefits or challenges of implementing the RTI process?

Six categories emerged from the data analyses:

1) Lack of Time
2) Confusion about f*orms*
3) Inadequate Professional Development
4) Inconsistency and Change
5) Lack of teacher buy-in
6) Limited understandings on how to give formative assessments.

The researcher related these categories to the research questions to come up with findings.

## Study Findings

**Finding #1:** Participants' understandings of RTI varied greatly between campuses as influenced by the use or non-use of formative assessments in daily instruction, administrative understandings, expectations, and support, and differing campus RTI protocols.

**Finding #2**: Participants demonstrated a consistent lack of understanding and expressed frustration about RTI . All participants expressed a need and desire for additional training in RTI.

**Finding #3:** Participants' perceptions of RTI were both positively and negatively influenced by expectations of campus administrators and by goals set by campus RTI committees. Fidelity to a campus- wide system of RTI support affected teachers' understandings and perceptions.

**Finding #4:** Participants' perceived that the primary benefit of the RTI process was teachers increased awareness of
their students' needs. Perceived challenges included; lack of time to implement, document, and collaborate with peers, confusion on which forms to use and how to complete them, lack of overall professional development, and continually changing expectations for implementation and protocols.

## Solution: District-wide Digital Professional Development Plan

Guskey (2000) describes professional development as a process that is intentional, ongoing, and systematic (p. 16). Intended outcomes, or goals, must be clearly stated and be important to all learners. The goals of the proposed professional development plan respond to the needs of teachers in LISD based on the review of literature, the local problem, and findings from the qualitative inquiry.

### Goals:

1. Improve educators' and administrators' understandings of the RTI process
2. Improve educators' use of formative assessments
3. Improve educators' understandings of evidence-based practices
4. Improve and align campus administrators' understandings of RTI protocols

Researchers have shown that learners who receive ongoing PD from experts are more likely to effectively apply new knowledge and skills with fidelity (Abbot & Wills, 2012). The proposed online training modules were developed in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education by leading experts in RTI
research. Universally available for public and educational use, the modules are self-paced, user-friendly, and incorporate a combination of challenge, interactive activities, and multiple opportunities for sharing, assessment, and revision.

### Online Professional Development : *IRIS*

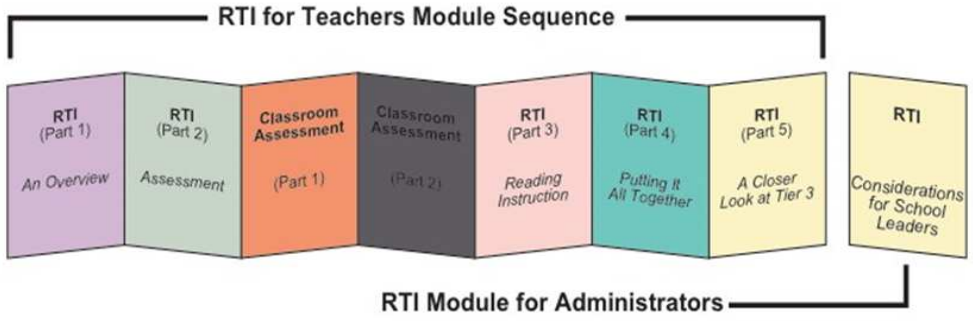
Providing district-wide online training from one credible source will establish a uniform knowledge base for all professional educators in LISD. The IRIS Center Peabody College at Vanderbilt University is a national center dedicated to improving education outcomes for all children through the use of effective evidence-based practices and interventions. Funded through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), the IRIS Center meets the following national standards:

- CAEP Accreditation Standards
- CEC Initial Level Special Educator Preparation Standards
- DEC Recommended Practices in Early Intervention and Early Childhood Special Education
- InTASC Model Core Teaching Standards
- NCATE Professional Standards for the Accreditation of Teacher Preparation Institutions

Grounded in the theoretical framework of the *How People Learn Theory* (Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching, 2015) and formatted using the *STAR* (Software Technology for Action and Reflection) *Legacy Model,* modules use a problem-based approach to help learners gain a better understanding of instructional issues within an inquiry cycle that is easily understood and is pedagogically sound. While the IRIS training modules may be used by university professors or professional development providers, they are also recommended for practicing educators. (The IRIS Center, 2013).

### RTI for Teachers Module Sequence

As seen in *Figure 2* the IRIS Center's *RTI for Teachers Module Sequence* is presented using a series of case study units.



**RTI for Teachers Module Sequence (continued)**

1. **RTI (Part 1): An Overview** gives an overview of RTI tiers, protocols, and how the RTI process relates to special education.
2. **RTI (Part 2): Assessment** discusses data-driven decision making, universal screening, and progress monitoring.
3. **Classroom Assessment (Part 1)** reviews appropriate and effective ways to monitor students' progress and shows how to implement progress monitoring.
4. **Classroom Assessment (Part 2)** discusses how use progress monitoring to track students' progress and how to administer formative reading assessments and CBMs.
5. **RTI (Part 3): Reading Instruction** shows what high quality reading instruction looks like in the classroom, reviews the five core components of reading, and provides instructional reading strategies for Tier 1 and Tier 2.
6. **RTI (Part 4): Putting it All Together** reviews information presented in modules 1, 2, and 3 and provides a comprehensive illustration of how to successfully implement RTI on a school campus.
7. **RTI (Part 5): A Closer Look at Tier 3** explains the purpose of Tier 3 and what Tier 3 interventions should look like. This module also discusses how to assess students' progress on Tier 3 and how this tier connects to special education.
8. **RTI: Considerations for School Leaders** addresses what school-wide support looks like, roles of RTI committee members, and how to evaluate the effectiveness of school-wide implementation.

All IRIS training modules follow the 5-step *STAR Legacy Model* to promote authentic learning that focuses on real-life situations. Using the *Whole-Part-Whole* approach, every module begins with an overarching challenge or problem, followed by specific implementation strategies to solve the problem. It is important that learners take the trainings in the recommended sequence to ensure continuity and a of all RTI components. Completing one module in order to "unlock" the next and providing learners with opportunities to reflect and respond to the content of each module would ensure continuity and module alignment. Learners could earn credits for individual modules and a "district certification" for having completed all modules. In this way, should teachers move between campuses or districts, they would have documentation showing they had been trained in a standards-based RTI program.

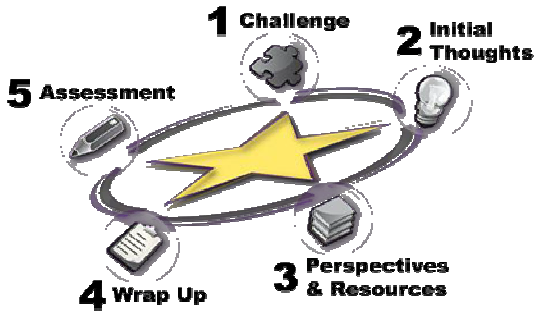



**Figure 3: The 5-step *STAR Legacy Model* method of inquiry (IRIS Center, 2015)**

Professional Development Plan

## Implementation

### Lewisville Online Learning Academy (LOLA)

Current research indicates that the most common cause of failed intervention is a lack of fidelity of implementation (Texas Education Agency, 2009). Providing consistent high-quality trainings to all educators and administrators in LISD will ensure a universal understanding that promotes program fidelity. Educators can access *IRIS* modules on the district's professional development web page to earn professional development credit.

As RTI is a general education program that is not directly related to dyslexia services, it is recommended that a unique *RTI* courses link leading to the IRIS training modules be created. In this way, RTI training would be universally available to all district professionals.


**Figure 4:** Lewisville Online Learner Academy (LOLA) professional development links

## Timeline

Just as scaffolds to support student learning are important for students' academic successes so are scaffolds to support a systematic implementation of RTI on a district or campus (Rupley, Blair, & Nichols,2009). The following table provides district personnel, campus administrators, and teachers with an implementation timeline for the proposed professional development plan for. Posting the timeline on LISD's RTI web page for universal viewing with an attached blog for feedback is recommended to ensure ongoing communication and support.

| | |
|---|---|
| | **J** |
| **District Personnel** | Ÿ Watch *RTI: Considerations for School Leaders* and set district short and long-<br>term goals.<br>Ÿ Create district trainings on LOLA by embedding IRIS modules into district online trainings that contain formative assessments and end-of-RTI Sequence evaluations.<br>Ÿ Establish district recognitions and certifications for individual module completions and entire RTI Plan completion (e.g. district certification similar to |
| | **J** |
| **District Personnel** | Ÿ Ensure PD links and blogs are updated and working<br>Ÿ Update district RTI forms and information to reflect the current year<br>Ÿ Collaboratively watch *RTI: Considerations for School Leaders* with campus<br>principals and introduce district RTI goals as exemplars for campus goals.<br>Ÿ Introduce LOLA trainings, RTI webpage, resources and blogs to campus<br>administrators. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Campus Administrators** | Ÿ Watch *RTI: Considerations for School Leaders* with district/campus administrators and collaborate/communicate with colleagues about campus expectations and protocols.<br>Ÿ Collaborate with campus RTI committee to watch *RTI: Considerations for School Leaders,* set short long-term campus goals, create timelines, and review procedures, and forms.<br>Ÿ Post campus goals, timelines, procedures and forms on the campus website. Delegate an RTI committee member to maintain campus RTI website.<br>Ÿ Preview *RTI (Part 1): An Overview* module.<br>Ÿ Train campus staff in RTI during staff in-service using *RTI (Part 1): An Overview* module.<br>Ÿ Ensure that teachers watch: *RTI (Part 2): Assessment* with grade level teams or independently and review current student data.<br>Ÿ Use RTI resources on the district RTI webpage and give feedback. |

Professional Development Plan

| July/Augus | |
|---|---|
| **Teachers** | Ÿ Watch RTI (Part 1): An Overview and discuss campus goals and expectations during staff in-service. Set short and long-term goals for the year..<br>Ÿ Watch: *RTI (Part 2): Assessment* with grade level teams or independently and review current student data. |
| **S** | |
| **District Personnel** | Ÿ Review district expectations for universal screenings and corresponding district cut-scores for identifying at-risk students with principals. Post cut-scores on the district RTI webpage.<br>Ÿ Show parts of *Classroom Assessment (Part 1)* to principals at monthly meeting to discuss progress monitoring strategies and documentation.<br>Ÿ Ensure district-wide RTI program fidelity by highlighting successes and giving positive reinforcement during monthly principal meeting |
| **Campus Administrators** | Ÿ Discuss universal screenings and corresponding cut-scores with campus staff.<br>Ÿ Collaboratively watch or ensure that teachers independently watch *Classroom Assessment (Part 1)* and discuss progress monitoring strategies and documentation.<br>Ÿ Meet with RTI committee to review/adjust campus goals, timelines, procedures, and forms. |

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| **Teachers** | Ÿ Observe students using daily SGI<br>Ÿ Watch *Classroom Assessment (Part 1)*<br>Ÿ Conduct fall universal screening<br>Ÿ Identify at-risk students using district cut-scores<br>Ÿ Meet with grade level teams to ensure fidelity in progress monitoring strategies and documentation.<br>Ÿ Begin Tier 1 documentation on students of concern.<br>Ÿ Use RTI resources on the district RTI webpage and give feedback. |

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| **District Personnel** | Ÿ Show parts of *Classroom Assessment (Part 2)* to principals at monthly meeting to discuss formative assessments and CBMs.<br>Ÿ Use RTI resources such as those listed in the resource list posted on the district RTI webpage to model formative assessments and progress monitoring strategies.<br>Ÿ Review progress and challenges by reviewing parts of *RTI: Considerations for School Leaders* with principals to formatively assess implementation successes and challenges to-date.<br>Ÿ Show principals student progress graphs to support fidelity of implementation.<br>Ÿ Integrate principals' feedback into monthly principals' meeting and in |
| **Campus Administrators** | Ÿ Collaboratively watch or ensure that teachers independently watch *Classroom Assessment (Part 2)* and discuss formative assessments and CBMs.<br>Ÿ Use RTI resources such as those listed in the list posted on the district RTI webpage to model formative assessments and progress monitoring strategies.<br>Ÿ Meet with RTI committee to review procedures and forms and to create student progress graph templates that show student growth and support fidelity of implementation.<br>Ÿ Continue RTI meetings<br>Ÿ Use RTI resources on the district RTI webpage and give feedback. |

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| **Teachers** | Ÿ Watch *Classroom Assessment (Part 2)*<br>Ÿ Use RTI resources such as those listed in the resource list posted on the district RTI webpage to create formative assessments and progress monitoring strategies.<br>Ÿ Meet with grade level teams to ensure fidelity of progress monitoring strategies and documentation.<br>Ÿ Engage in the RTI process.<br>Ÿ Use RTI resources on the district RTI webpage and give feedback. |

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| **District Personnel** | Ÿ Show parts of *RTI (Part 3): Reading Instruction* to principals at monthly meeting to review campus reading instruction expectations.<br>Ÿ Formatively assess principals' use of RTI resources such as those on the list posted on the district RTI webpage through an online survey or paper survey at monthly principals' meeting.<br>Ÿ Based on principals' feedback from the formative assessment given in October review parts of *RTI: Considerations for School Leaders* and make necessary changes.<br>Ÿ Integrate principals' feedback into monthly principals' meeting and in blogs.<br>Ÿ Monitor, maintain, and respond to blog posts |
| **Campus Administrators** | Ÿ Collaboratively watch or ensure that teachers independently watch *RTI (Part 3): Reading Instruction* and discuss campus reading expectations and challenges.<br>Ÿ Meet with grade level teams to review and assess formative reading assessments and implementation challenges.<br>Ÿ Assign campus mentors or set team teaching expectations to support teachers' understandings of and fidelity to formative reading assessments<br>Ÿ Formatively assess teachers' use of RTI resources (online or paper) |
| **Teachers** | Ÿ Watch *RTI (Part 3): Reading Instruction*<br>Ÿ Meet with grade level teams to review and assess formative reading assessments and implementation challenges.<br>Ÿ Engage in the RTI process. |

| **December** | |
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| **District Personnel** | Ÿ Show parts of *RTI (Part 4): Putting it All Together* to principals at monthly meeting and discuss challenges to and fidelity of implementation.<br>Ÿ Based on principals' feedback from the formative assessment given in November, integrate RTI resources with *RTI (Part 4): Putting it All Together.*<br>Ÿ Integrate principals' feedback into monthly principals' meeting and in blogs.<br>Ÿ Monitor, maintain, and respond to blog posts |

| December (continued) | |
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| **Campus Administrators** | Ÿ Collaboratively watch or ensure that teachers independently watch *RTI (Part 4): Putting it All Together* and discuss challenges to and fidelity of implementation.<br>Ÿ Review and evaluate initial goals set in August<br>Ÿ Meet with campus mentors or grade level team leaders to review grade level reading practices and use of formative reading assessments<br>Ÿ Meet with RTI committee to formatively assess RTI procedures<br>Ÿ Meet with grade level teams to analyze student data and progress graphs |
| **Teachers** | Ÿ Watch *RTI (Part 4): Putting it All Together*<br>Ÿ Meet with grade level teams to review and evaluate initial goals set in August<br>Ÿ Engage in the RTI process. |
| January | |

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| **District Personnel** | Ÿ Show parts of *RTI (Part 5): A Closer Look at Tier 3* to principals at monthly meeting to discuss campus Tier 3 interventions and special education referrals. Invite a diagnostician or district or Special Education Director to attend for Q&A (possibly record and post on district webpage with FAQs).<br>Ÿ Review district recognitions and certifications for individual module completions and entire RTI Plan completion (e.g. district certification similar to Gifted and Talented certification) and recognize campus administrators and campus staff participation.<br>Ÿ Integrate principals' feedback into monthly principals' meeting and in blogs.<br>Ÿ Monitor, maintain, and respond to blog posts<br>Ÿ Offer a voluntary online or face-to-face book study with a user-friendly book such as Allington's, *What Really Matters* in *Response to Intervention* to deepen interested administrators' understandings of RTI . |

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| **January** | |
| **Campus Administrators** | Ÿ Collaboratively watch or ensure that teachers independently watch *RTI (Part 5): A Closer Look at Tier 3* and review the RTI process as a continuum. Invite the campus diagnostician to attend for Q & A.<br>Ÿ Review district recognitions and certifications for individual module completions and entire RTI Plan completion (e.g. district certification similar to Gifted and Talented certification) and recognize campus staff completions.<br>Ÿ Meet with RTI committee to formatively assess RTI procedures<br>Ÿ Meet with grade level teams to analyze student data and progress graphs<br>Ÿ Offer a voluntary campus book study with a user-friendly book such as Allington's, *What Really Matters* in *Response to Intervention* to deepen interested teachers' understandings of RTI.<br>Ÿ Use RTI resources on the district RTI webpage and give feedback. |
| **Teachers** | Ÿ Watch *RTI (Part 5): A Closer Look at Tier 3*<br>Ÿ Meet with grade level teams to review and evaluate initial goals set in August<br>Ÿ Analyze student data and student progress graphs<br>Ÿ Participate in a voluntary campus book study with a user-friendly book such as Allington's, *What Really Matters* in *Response to Intervention* |
| **February** | |

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| **District Personnel** | Ÿ Collaboratively watch parts of *RTI: Considerations for School Leaders* with campus principals and review district RTI goals.<br>Ÿ Review LOLA trainings, RTI webpage, resources and blogs with campus administrators.<br>Ÿ Review district recognitions and certifications for individual module completions and entire RTI Plan completion (e.g. district certification similar to Gifted and Talented certification)<br>Ÿ Create and conduct an evaluative survey of RTI with campus |
| **Campus Administrators** | Ÿ Meet with RTI committee to formatively assess procedures and discuss implementation challenges<br>Ÿ Meet with grade level teams to discuss RTI implementation challenges and student data<br>Ÿ Use RTI resources on the district RTI webpage and give feedback.<br>Ÿ Continue book study (if relevant) |

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| **February** | |
| **Teachers** | Ÿ Meet with grade level teams and campus administrator to discuss implementation successes and challenges.<br>Ÿ Analyze student data and student progress graphs<br>Ÿ Continue book study (if relevant)<br>Ÿ Use RTI resources on the district RTI webpage and blog feedback. |
| **M** | |
| **District Personnel** | Ÿ Meet with district Curriculum Coordinator to discuss integrating RTI procedures in online curriculum for the next year.<br>Ÿ Collect, analyze, and interpret blog responses from LOLA trainings and RTI webpage<br>Ÿ Share findings from data analysis with campus principals and make appropriate changes in webpage<br>Ÿ Review progress of short and long-term goals<br>Ÿ Based on feedback, incorporate additional IRIS modules that target administrator and educator areas of need. |
| **Campus Administrators** | Ÿ Meet with RTI committee to evaluate campus RTI procedures and review short and long-term goals<br>Ÿ Meet with grade level teams to analyze student data and progress graphs<br>Ÿ Use RTI resources on the district RTI webpage and blog feedback.<br>Ÿ Share summative data from district with RTI committee and teachers and discuss changes for next year. |

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| **Teachers** | Ÿ Meet with grade level teams and campus administrator to discuss implementation successes and challenges.<br>Ÿ Analyze student data and student progress graphs<br>Ÿ Continue book study (if relevant)<br>Ÿ Use RTI resources on the district RTI webpage and blog feedback. |

Evaluation

A fundamental feature of any program is the planned evaluation of the integrity with which it is delivered (Kovaleski, 2013). In his book, *Evaluating Professional Development* (2000), Guskey lists the following three steps to ensure that intended outcomes are reached:

1. Begin with a clear statement of purposes and goals.
2. Ensure that the goals are worthwhile.
3. Determine how the goals can be assessed. (p. 19)

To determine if the RTI professional development plan is effective, it is important to use both ongoing formative assessments and end-of-program summative evaluations. The terms, "assessment" and "evaluation" describe the short and long-term processes used to prove the effectiveness of educational activities and programs (Duke Center for Instructional Technology, 2015). As shown in the table below, "assessment" refers to the short-term formative process that measures teaching effectiveness and student learning while "evaluation" refers to the broader review of the systematic process.

| Areas of Difference | Assessment | Evaluation |
|---|---|---|
| **Content:** timing, primary purpose | *Formative*: ongoing to improve learning | *Summative*: final, to gauge quality |
| **Orientation**: focus of measurement | *Process-oriented*: how learning is going | *Product-oriented*: what's been learned |
| **Findings**: uses | *Diagnostic*: identify areas for improvement | *Judgmental*: arrive at an overall grade/score |

**Figure 5:** Assessment vs. Evaluation
(Duke University, 2015)

As the intended outcomes of the proposed professional development plan target improvement of educators and administrators' overall knowledge of the RTI process as well as specific components, formative assessments and summative evaluations must measure the growth of every goal.

1. Improve educators' and administrators' understandings of the RTI process
2. Improve educators' use of formative assessments
3. Improve educators' understandings of evidence-based practices
4. Improve campus administrators' understandings of RTI procedures and district-wide alignment of RTI

### Formative Assessment

As all IRIS training modules contain an assessment component within *The STAR Legacy Model* cycle of inquiry, LISD district administrators can save time and effort by using data from these pre-established assessments to determine how learning is going and to identify areas of improvement. In addition to compiling data from learners' responses in module assessments, administrators can create a learner-response page or a blog in LOLA. In this way, learners can learn from each others' feedback and administrators can revise trainings to better meet the needs of all learners.

Posting sections of PD plan the district's RTI web page will allow administrators to develop a dialogue with teachers and administrators and receive formative feedback. By creating blogs linked to *RTI Resources, FAQs About RTI*, and the *Timeline*, district administrators will encourage ongoing communication with stakeholders and the RTI Program in LISD can be maintained and sustained.


### Summative Evaluation

The proposed implementation timeline outlines a six-month time frame for teachers and campus administrators to complete all modules in the *RTI for Teachers Module Sequence*. In February, it is recommended that district personnel create and conduct two evaluative surveys; one for campus administrators and one for teachers that is based on the formative assessments and blog posts over the past six months. In March, April, and May, it is recommended that district administrators collect, analyze and interpret participants' responses from module assessments and blog posts and share findings with campus administrators before the end of the school year. Based on the findings from these evaluations, district administrators will incorporate additional IRIS modules that target administrator and educator areas of need

# Summary

### Summative Evaluation

The proposed implementation timeline outlines a six-month time frame for teachers and campus administrators to complete all modules in the *RTI for Teachers Module Sequence*. In February, it is recommended that district personnel create and conduct two evaluative surveys; one for campus administrators and one for teachers that is based on the formative assessments and blog posts over the past six months. In March, April, and May, it is recommended that district administrators collect, analyze and interpret participants' responses from module assessments and blog posts and share findings with campus administrators before the end of the school year. Based on the findings from these evaluations, district administrators will incorporate additional IRIS modules that target administrator and educator areas of need.

### Recommendations for Future PD

The *RTI for Teachers Module Sequence* could be given to all new or new-to-the-district teachers and administrators. It could also viewed every 3 years by teachers and administrators in order to maintain district RTI certification.

The IRIS Center offers hundreds of training modules, case studies, online resources and materials in English and Spanish related to evidence-based practices over a broad range of topics. Future district professional development on topics related to RTI could be provided using the same format recommended in this professional development plan

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## RTI Resources

### Center for Response to Intervention in Early Childhood

This site provides information about current research, resources, sample interventions, presentations, and a network for PreK/Early Childhood systems.

### Center on Instruction

This site offers a self-assessment tool to help states and school districts gauge their current level of RTI implementation. A subsidiary link, RTI Central is the result of Center's collaborative efforts with eight states (including Texas) to provide school districts with instructional strategies and technical assistance in RTI implementation. It also offers instructional materials for grades K-12 in the following areas:

- Literacy
- Science, Technology and Math
- Special Education
- English Language Learning

### Florida Center for Reading Research

This site offers online trainings, research, and access to 500+ evidence-based interventions. The Student Center Activities and Instructional Routines Search Tool helps teachers find and print specific instructional interventions and by grade level, reading component (Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency,

Vocabulary, Comprehension), subcomponent, or DIBELS measure.

### Intervention Central

This site has many excellent RTI resources and tools including:
- Academic Intervention Planner for Struggling Students
- Behavior Intervention Planner
- Early Math Fluency Generator
- Learning Disability Accommodations Finder
- Letter Name Fluency Generator
- Reading Fluency Passage Generator

### IDEA Partnership

This site is the collaborative work of 50+ national, state, and local organizations and is dedicated to teaching about RTI. It includes topics such as:

- English Language Learners
- Assistive Technology
- Family, School, and Community Collaboration
- RTI: Foundational Dialogue

### National Center on Intensive Intervention

This site is dedicated to data-based individualization (DBI), a research-based process for individualizing and intensifying interventions through systematic use of assessment data, validated interventions, and research-based strategies. It offers tools charts, implementation support, instructional support, and a variety of training and informational resources.

### International Reading Association

This site contains current news, articles, links to related sites, and resources such as Units and Lesson Plans for immediate implementation, Reading Lists for children, teachers, and young adults, information on RTI, information for Parents, and Professional Development.

**IRIS Center: Vanderbilt University**

This site offers interactive trainings and resources to be used in both college and university courses and in professional development activities for practicing educators The Resource Locator offers hundreds of topics related to RTI, including training and activities related to:

- Diversity
- Differentiated Instruction
- Learning Strategies
- Behavior and Classroom Management

**National Association of State Directors of Special Education, Inc. (NASDSE)**

This site offers publications, federal legislation, and resource links related to special education services.

**National Center for Learning Disabilities**

This site sponsors several advocacy websites for educators, parents, and researchers including:

- Get Ready to Read
- Understood
- LD Navigator
- RTI Action Network

**National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI)**

This site is supported by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and provides information and technical assistance to individuals and state education agencies about RTI. Topics of information include:

- Essential Components of RTI: Tiers, Universal Screening, Progress Monitoring
- Related Topics to RTI: ELLs, Implementation and Evaluation, Special Education
- Resources: Tools Charts, Implementer Series, Glossary of Terms, Publications

**National Center on Student Progress Monitoring**

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) 2003- 2008, this site offers a wide variety of articles, trainings, and websites related to RTI including:

- Data-based Decision Making
- Progress Monitoring Tools
- Student Progress Monitoring Resources for Families
- Curriculum-Based Measurement (CBM)
- Webinars and Online Trainings for Educators

**National Implementation Research Network (NIRN)**

This research-based site focuses on the science of implementation as it relates to evidence-based programs and practices. It offers articles, books, and reports, presentations, and implementation strategies.

**RTI Action Network**

This site provides a wealth of RTI information and tools for educators, parents and families, and addresses the RTI process from the following perspectives:

- Pre K
- K-5
- Middle School
- High School
- Higher Ed

**Understood**

Designed for parents and families of students with learning and attention challenges, this site offers a personalized and interactive Parent Coach and Toolkit as well as current research in

- School and Learning
- Learning and Attention Issues
- Friends and Feelings
- Community Networking Blogs

**U.S. Dept. of Education Data Express**

This interactive site gives current national and state data such as a state snapshot of Texas state educational programs, and definitions of educational terms.

**What Works Clearinghouse**

This site reviews the research on the different programs, products, practices, and policies in education to provide educators with the information to make evidence-based decisions. In addition to Practice Guides and Intervention Reports, the site reviews the effectiveness of products and programs including:

- Educational Technology
- Early Childhood Education
- Literacy
- Math
- Science
- English Language Learners

## FAQs About RTI for Educators

1. What is RTI?
2. Why do teachers need to understand RTI?
3. How is RTI connected to special education?
4. How is RTI connected to literacy?

### 1. What is RTI?

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a federally mandated educational reform effort designed to improve teaching and learning in all U.S. schools. Written to identify and support students who are at risk of failing, RTI is intended to ensure high-quality classroom instruction and provide additional targeted instruction where needed. Originally introduced as part of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, RTI is now included in the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (NRCLD) published guidelines and supports the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) to reduce special education referrals.

In 2004, the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) introduced RTI as pre-cursor to the traditional special education assessment used to identify and place low-achieving students. RTI provides a multi-tiered framework to screen students within the general curricula and provide effective practices to improve student academic performance and close identified learning gaps.

### 2. Why do teachers need to understand RTI?

- The quality of teachers' core classroom instruction is the most important factor in successful student outcomes
- Students who do not receive adequate classroom instruction may be misidentified as needing additional support or special education services
- Teachers play a key role in effectively implementing the RTI process by providing high quality, core classroom instruction that integrates research-based and evidence-based curricula. If some or all students do not show evidence of learning in the classroom, the teacher must determine why and adjust his/her teaching methods to meet the needs of all learners.
- Research shows that teachers' understanding of and "buy-in" to the RTI process are vital to its success and that teachers' perceptions of RTI are influenced by:
    - Understanding the purpose of the program
    - Professional development
    - Collaboration with peers
    - Administrative support

### 3. How is RTI connected to Special Education?

While it is true that RTI can be a precursor to special education, it's primary purpose is to deter special education referrals by providing additional time and relevant instruction needed to fill students' learning gaps through progress-monitoring and data-driven decision making (Cicek, 2012; Fuchs et al., 2012). According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (2014), RTI expedites the identification

process for students who struggle and limits the number of minority students who are inappropriately referred for special education testing.

**Statistics:**

- Between 1991 and 2006, the number of students in LISD identified as needing Special Education services increased by 38%.
- Nationally, up to 40% of students who are identified as LD do not need special education services (Cicek, 2012).
- Students who are two years behind in reading by the end of second grade are unlikely to ever catch up to grade- level proficiency
- The cost to educate a special education student is 2-3 times more than a general education student
- Providing early instructional intervention to students who are struggling (aka "at-risk") will either close students' learning gaps or provide data for future instructional decisions

The first criterion for identification of specific learning disability (SLD) requires a determination that the student is failing to meet age- or grade-level state standards in one of eight areas (see the above definitions). Data used to identify gaps between students' performance and grade-level state standards are pulled from:

**Performance on state assessments** State academic content standards for the student's enrolled grade are presented through the TEKS and assessed on the STAAR.

**Universal screening and benchmark testing** of all students, typically administered three times per year, focusing on foundational skills and aligned with state standards.

**Formative assessments**. Aligned with grade-level state standards, these are frequent "learning checks" such as running records that guide instruction within the classroom.

- **Norm-referenced assessments of academic achievement, correlated to state standards**. Unit tests or benchmarks aligned with TEKS (not created by the teacher) in the area of concern.
- **Information provided by the student's parents** that the student has a history of not meeting age or grade-level state standards, as evidenced by data from prior evaluations, developmental history questionnaires, other information, and/or that there is a family history of LD, other family members with LD, and/or delayed acquisition of reading and/or math skills.

**Additional Considerations:**

**State norms. Norm-referenced assessments provide an indicator of the average performance of a student in the same grade in comparison with other students across the country. Local norms are based on grade-level state standards.**

**Cultural and linguistic sensitivity**. If differences in culture or language are not considered when interpreting assessment data, the result may be an inappropriate disability designation. For students whose primary language is not English, an evaluation of their current English skills is recommended to show lack of language is not a contributing factor to identified deficits.

**4. How is RTI connected to literacy?**

Literacy represents 75% of skills evaluated in special education testing:

1. Oral expression
2. Listening comprehension
3. Written expression
4. Basic reading skill
5. Reading fluency skills
6. Reading comprehension
7. Mathematics calculation
8. Mathematics problem solving

**Oral expression** is the ability to convey wants, needs, thoughts, and ideas in a meaningful way. It relates to a student's ability to express ideas, explain thinking, retell stories, categorize, and compare and contrast concepts or ideas, make references, and problem solve verbally.

**Listening comprehension** refers to the understanding of the implications and explicit meanings of words and sentences of spoken language. This includes following directions, comprehending questions, and listening and comprehending in order to learn (e.g., auditory attention, auditory memory, and auditory perception). Listening comprehension also includes the ability to make connections to previous learning.

**Written expression** involves processes related to the *transcription* of ideas and thoughts into a written product, such as handwriting and spelling. It involves *generative* processes such as the communication of ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Required skills include using oral language, thought, grammar, text fluency, sentence construction, and planning to produce a written product.

**Basic reading skill** includes sight word recognition, phonics, and word analysis. Essential skills include identification of individual sounds and the ability to manipulate them, identification of printed letters and sounds associated with letters, and decoding of written language.

**Reading fluency skills** refer to the ability to read words and text accurately, using age-appropriate chunking strategies and a repertoire of sight words, and with appropriate rate, phrasing, and expression (prosody). Reading fluency facilitates reading comprehension.

**Reading comprehension** refers to the ability to understand and make meaning of written text and includes a multifaceted set of skills. Reading comprehension is influenced by oral language development including new vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension, working memory, application of comprehension-monitoring strategies, and understanding of text structure including titles, paragraphing, illustrations, and other details. Reading comprehension is significantly affected by basic reading skills.

**Mathematical calculations:** the ability to retrieve mathematical facts and the application of procedural knowledge in computation.

**Mathematical problem solving** is the ability to apply mathematical concepts and understandings to real-world situations, often through word problems. It is the functional combination of computation knowledge and application knowledge, and involves the use of mathematical computation skills and

fluency, language, reasoning, reading, and visual-spatial skills in solving problems. Essentially, it is applying mathematical knowledge at the core.

Appendix B: Focus Group Interview Guide

Walden University
Lora Coonce, researcher and facilitator
**Focus Group Protocol**

"How Elementary Classroom Teachers' Perceptions of Response to Intervention (RTI) Affect Core Classroom Instruction"

**Introduction (20 minutes prior to start)**

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this group interview/discussion. Your responses will benefit LISD by giving insight into elementary classroom teachers' perceptions of the RTI process and how these support classroom instruction". Help yourself to pizza, salad, and drinks, and feel free to get up and use the restroom as necessary.

Introduce myself (doctoral student, active listener role)

State the purpose of the discussion: The purpose of today's discussion is to better understand how your perceptions of the RTI process affect core classroom instruction.

**Informed Consent** (give to participants to review while I go over it)

1. The purpose of the study is to gain insight into how you perceive or understand the RTI process and how your perceptions affect how or what you teach in the classroom.
2. Your identity will not be linked to your responses. I will not report any information that could identify you in any way, like your name, grade level, or personal characteristics.
3. The data I collect will remain confidential- I am the only person who will have access to your responses.
4. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. You can choose to leave or not answer any questions asked if it makes you feel uncomfortable at any time during our discussion.

PAUSE and answer questions: Are there any questions about the informed consent document?

COLLECT CONSENT FORMS: If there are no more questions, then please sign the form, and I will give you a copy before we leave today.

**Permission to Record**

I will be recording this discussion and will transcribe it

- I am the only person who will have access to this recording and to the transcript.
- When I transcribe the recording to print, I will not use names. I will use descriptors that only I will be able to identify
- When I am done transcribing, I will give you copies of the transcript so you can verify that it accurate. You are welcome to change your responses at any time to correct or expound on what you said during our discussion today.

- After transcribing and verifying with you, I will reflect on your interview responses and on your documentation logs, summarize them, and write about what themes or patterns emerge. I will never share information with anyone that would allow you to be identified.

**Begin Interview/Recording (approximately 90 minutes)**

**Ground Rules**

- I will first be asking you all about yourselves and your backgrounds, after which I will ask you 5-8 primary questions about your perceptions and experiences with RTI. For each question, I will be asking you to expound, explain or clarify. Don't be shy about agreeing, disagreeing, or voicing your opinion. This is a discussion, and I would like everyone to participate with her unique and worthwhile point of view
- All ideas and experiences are equally valid
- There are no right or wrong answers—I am interested in hearing about your experiences, your opinions, your feelings, and your perceptions.

**Background Information on Interviewees**

1. What is your name, what grade level do you teach, and how long have you been teaching?
2. What made you want to be a teacher?

**Question #1: What were you doing when RTI was first introduced and what are your first recollections of RTI?**

Possible probes:

- What was your first impression?
- How did the process work?
- Who presented it?
- Was it beneficial to students?

**Question #2: How does the RTI process work in this school?**

Probes

- How do you determine if a student is at-risk?
- How do you help an at-risk student?

**Question #3: How have your perceptions of RTI changed over the years?**

Possible probes:

- What changed your perceptions?
- How have your perceptions influenced your classroom instruction?

**Question #4: What do you see as some pros and cons of the RTI process?**

Possible probes:

- Can you give me an example?
- What made that successful?
- What do you think caused that to happen?

**Question #5: What does tier 1 look like in your classroom?**

Possible probes:

- What do you do if tier 1 isn't working?
- Can you describe it or give me an example?

**Question #6: Suppose you get a new student who appears to be struggling in Reading. Describe how the RTI process would help this student.**

Possible probes:

- How do you know a student is struggling?
- What do you do when you see a student struggling?
- Who helps you help the student?
- When do you take a student to tier 2?
- How do you take a student to tie 2?

**Question #7: How does RTI make you a better teacher?**

Possible probes:

- What do you do differently because of RTI?
- How does RTI influence your planning and delivering instruction in your classroom?
- With whom do you collaborate in the RTI process?

**Questions #7: What professional development has helped you better understand and implement the RTI process?**

Possible probes:

- How did that help you?
- Would you like more or less of PD related to RTI?
- What type of PD has been the most helpful, and why?

**Question #8: How does your understanding of the RTI process affect the way you teach?**

**Question #9: What is the level of teacher "buy-in" to RTI on your campus?**

Possible probes:

- What makes that successful? (or unsuccessful)
- Who makes that happen?
- What would recommend to other schools?

**Is there anything else anyone would like to add, or a question you would like to re-visit?**

**Thank you for participating today. Your responses will help campus and district administrators better understand elementary classroom teachers' perceptions of the RTI process. Remember I will be sending you a copy of the transcript of this interview for you to review.**

Appendix C: Campus X Individual Interview Guide

Walden University
Lora Coonce, researcher and facilitator
**Individual Interview Protocol**

"How Elementary Classroom Teachers' Perceptions of Response to Intervention (RTI) Affect Core Classroom Instruction"

**Introduction (20 minutes prior to start)**

Thank you for meeting with me again to talk about your perceptions of RTI. Your responses will help campus and district administrators better understand elementary classroom teachers' perceptions of the RTI process.
State the purpose of the discussion: The purpose of this interview is to find out more about how you perceive the RTI process and how this affects your daily classroom instruction.

**Informed Consent** (give to participant to review while I go over it)
1. The purpose of the study is to gain insight into how you perceive or understand the RTI process and how your perceptions affect your daily classroom instruction.
2. Your identity will not be linked to your responses. I will not report any information that could identify you in any way, like your name, grade level, or personal characteristics.
3. The data I collect will remain confidential- I am the only person who will have access to your responses.
4. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. You can choose to leave or not answer any questions asked if it makes you feel uncomfortable at any time during our discussion.
PAUSE and answer questions: Do you have any questions about the informed consent document?
COLLECT CONSENT FORM: If there are no more questions, then please sign the form, and I will give you a copy before we leave today.

**Permission to Record**
I will be recording this discussion and will transcribe it

- I am the only person who will have access to this recording and to the transcript.
- When I transcribe the recording to print, I will not use names. I will use descriptors that only I will be able to identify

- When I am done transcribing, I will give you a copy of the transcript so you can verify that it accurate. You are welcome to change your responses at any time to correct or expound on what you said during our discussion today.

- After transcribing and verifying with you, I will reflect on your interview responses and on your documentation logs, summarize them, and write about what themes or patterns emerge. I will never share information with anyone that will allow you to be identified.

**Begin Interview/Recording**

**Ground Rules**

- I will first be asking you about yourself and your background, after which I will ask you 5 questions about how you perceive and use RTI in your classroom.
- Please be as honest and specific as you can—I am interested in hearing about your experiences, your opinions, your feelings, and your perceptions.

**Background Information on Interviewees**

3. What is your name, what grade level do you teach, and how long have you taught at this school?
4. What do you like best about teaching at this school?

**Question #1: During the Focus group interview, you said, "_____". Can you tell me more about that?**

Probes: Could you give me an example?
What does that look like in your classroom?

**Question #2: Could you give me specific examples of how RTI intersects with your classroom instruction?**

Probes: How do you teach tier 1 and tier 2 differently?
How do you document your interventions?

**Question #3: How has professional development influenced your understanding of RTI?**

Probes: What was useful about that kind of PD?

**Question #4: In what ways do you feel supported by teammates, the RTI team, and administrators as you help students in the RTI process?**

Probes: Can you give me examples of how you collaborate?
How could communication be improved?

**Question #5: As a certified teacher, you are considered "highly qualified" by the state of Texas. Do you feel RTI supports or inhibits your best practices during daily classroom instruction?**

Probes: Tell me more about that
Could you give me an example?

**Is there anything you would like to add, or any questions you would like to re-visit or discuss?**

**Thank you again for your time and responses. You are helping LISD gain insight into how teachers perceive the RTI process, which will benefit our district. Remember I will send you a copy of the transcript of this interview for you to review.**

Appendix D: District Permission to Conduct Research

Research Proposal

Proposal For: Qualitative case study at two elementary school campuses in LISD

Person Conducting Research: Lora Coonce, cooncel@lisd.net, doctoral student at Walden University

Project Title: How Elementary School Teachers' Perceptions of Response to Intervention (RTI) Affect Core Classroom Instruction

Date of Project: Spring and Summer, 2014

**Research Procedures**

A. Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this study is to explore how elementary classroom teachers' perceptions of the RTI process influence daily classroom instruction. Research shows that teachers in districts with successful RTI programs have a variety of skills and knowledge on multiple levels such as understanding and implementing initial student screenings, developing and administering relevant assessments, and providing appropriately tiered instruction (Hoover & Love, 2011; Orosco & Klingner, 2010). Additional studies have shown that educators have more positive perceptions of the RTI process when they understand the overarching purpose of RTI and see themselves as change agents within this framework (Pyle, Wade-Woolley, & Hutchinson, 2011; O'Cotmor & Witter Freeman, 2012). I will use a qualitative case study design to gain deeper insight into how the process of RTI is perceived by 12 elementary classroom teachers in LISD.

B. Research Procedures

The researcher will:

a) Work with district administrators to determine two elementary campuses at which to conduct research
b) Meet with campus principals to determine possible participants for the study
c) Solicit volunteers after providing informed consent to elementary teachers at selected sites
d) Obtain informed consent from all participants (all participants will be over 18 years old)
e) Conduct two focus group interviews at two different elementary school campuses in LISD School District. Each focus group will be made up of 4-6 purposefully selected classroom teachers representing grades K-5. Focus group sessions will take place after school hours and will each last approximately 90 minutes for each campus. The researcher will use a district-approved interview protocol to gather data from participants.

f) Conduct face-to-face ii1terviews with five of the focus group participants, allowing them to expand or elaborate their views and feelings. Each individual interview will last approximately 30 minutes and will take place in a public setting of the participant's choosing.
g) Code and thematically analyze participants' RTI logs in AWARE (removing any statements, names or scores that could identify respondents to protect participant confidentiality) to gain deeper insight into participants' understanding of the RTI process and to triangulate data.

*Selection of Subjects:* Participants will be solicited through district and campus administrators' recommendations and will be on a voluntary basis. Participant selection criteria is as follows: (a) K-5 full-time teacher, (b) employed by XYZ school district at a specific campus approved for the study, (c) years of experience ranging from 1 – 30 years as a public school educator, (d) signed consent to pat1icipate in the study. Participants will not include members of vulnerable or protected populations as listed by the Instructional Review Board.

*Treatment Groups:* NA- qualitative inquiry

*Data Collection:* Data will be collected over a two-week period using focus group interviews, individual interviews, and review of public documents.

Completed by Parents:
*(if applicable)*

Completed by Teachers:
*(If applicable)*

Completed by Child:
*(if applicable)*

C. Time Requirements
Six participants at each school will be asked to meet for focus group interviews after school for approximately 90 minutes.

D. Financial Requirements
None

Other Information as Needed

Assurance of Confidentiality and Attaining Parental Permission.

Attach Permission Form Anticipated Research Culmination Date:

December, 2014

Data collection completed by October 31, 2014

Results anticipated culmination by December 20, 2014

Copies of *Formative and Summative* Findings/Results/Research will be provided to: Lewisville ISD Superintendent; Associate Superintendent, Learning & Teaching; Pa1ticipating Campus Leadership and Personnel

I agree I will not publish any work created as a result of this research without first sharing results with and obtaining expressed permission from the Lewisville ISD Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment Services.

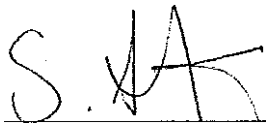
Researcher's Signature

5/5/2014

Date

Advisor's Signature

Date



Director of Assess
Signature and Accountability

5/5

Appendix E: Word Transcription

# CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

**Name of Signer:**

As a representative of Same Day Transcriptions, a professional transcription service, I acknowledge that my company will have access to confidential information that should not be disclosed from Lora Coonce's qualitative case study: "How Elementary Classroom Teachers' Perceptions of Response to Intervention Affect Core Classroom Instruction". I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

***By signing this Confidentiality Agreement I acknowledge and agree that:***

1. Same Day Transcriptions will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.
2. Same Day Transcriptions will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.
3. Same Day Transcriptions will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant's name is not used.
4. Same Day Transcriptions will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.
5. Same Day Transcriptions agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.
6. Same Day Transcriptions understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.
7. Same Day Transcriptions will only access or use systems or devices I'm officially authorized to access and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.

***Signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above.***

16 May, 2014

**Signature:** **Date:**

Appendix F: Informed Consent for RTI Study

You are invited to take part in a research study exploring how elementary classroom teachers' perceptions of the RTI process affect core classroom instruction. The researcher is inviting six elementary classroom teachers who are currently employed at your campus to represent his/her grade level in this study. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by Lora Coonce, who is a doctoral student at Walden University. You may already know Lora as a Literacy teacher, but this study is separate from that role.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to see how teachers' understanding of the RTI process influences daily classroom instruction.

**Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Verbally share your thoughts, understandings, and experiences related to RTI during a 90-minute group discussion with five other teachers from your school, each representing one grade level
- Share RTI documentation logs currently in AWARE (all names and identifying marks will be removed to ensure your anonymity)
- Possibly meet with the researcher for a 30-minute individual follow-up interview after school to clarify or expand your comments from the group interview.

**Here are some sample questions:**

- How does RTI data help guide instruction in your classroom?
- What is your understanding of tier 1 instruction compared to tier 2 and tier 3 interventions?
- What changes need to be made (if any) to improve the RTI process in your classroom?
- What obstacles or challenges have you faced in implementing the RTI process in your classroom?
- What methods of support, such as professional development, administrative leadership, have helped you understand and implement the RTI process in your daily classroom instruction?

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at your campus 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 fatigue, stress, or frustration. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing.

Benefits would include better understanding the RTI process through learning what other teachers are doing in other grade levels, sharing challenges and successes of RTI in your classroom and in your school, and improving communication with campus and administrative personnel to better train and support you in the RTI process.

**Payment:**

The researcher will provide pizza, drinks and dessert for participants during the group interview. There will be no other compensation given to participating teachers.

**Privacy:**

Any information you provide will be kept strictly 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 keeping all data in a password-protected computer and locked filing cabinet to which only the researcher has the key. 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 the researcher via email, [redacted] 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 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is **IRB will enter approval number here** and it expires on **IRB will enter expiration date.**

The researcher will give you 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 _____