

RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION: A TEACHER TEAM'S EXPERIENCES AND
CHALLENGES FOR DISTRICT AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

By

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To my Parents

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CHALLENGES FOR DISTRICT AND SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

By

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Chair: Linda Behar-Horenstein
Major: Educational Leadership

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 endorsed the Response to Intervention (RTI) model to replace the discrepancy model used to identify students for special education services and guide ways to ensure that all students' learning needs are met. The purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of a first grade teacher team's implementation of RTI, and elucidate practical, authentic recommendations for school leaders that would inform future practices for school and district RTI implementation and sustainability. Data was gathered from focus group interviews with the teacher team and observations of the seven first grade teachers at a rural Title 1 school. The school principal was also interviewed to gather a leadership perspective and compare it to the findings from the teachers. The study sought to answer three primary questions: 1) What new practices are required of teachers in RTI; 2) How does RTI affect teacher learning; and 3) How can school and district leadership best support teachers in the implementation of RTI?

The results indicated that a lack of effective school and district-wide leadership during the second year hindered the successful implementation of RTI as a prevention/intervention framework and as a replacement for the discrepancy model of

students qualifying for special education services. A lack of consistency between two district departments, changes in top district administration, and lack of oversight by the school leader had profound effects on teachers. Teachers in the study were coping with feelings of frustration, students who continued to struggle, and uncertainty about their own roles, the processes, and data based decision-making. The theme "coping with the effects of leadership challenges at the school and district level" emerged. In response, teachers employed coping/learning strategies including collaborating, questioning, initiating their own learning opportunities, and observing other teachers. Teachers in the study lacked the skills necessary to engage effectively in collaborative data analysis and data based decision-making. Despite a lack of professional development, leadership support, and tangible resources, RTI motivated the participants to become better teachers. The findings reinforced the crucial role that district and school leadership play in successfully implementing and sustaining RTI.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Response to Intervention (RTI) has been implemented with increased frequency since its endorsement by the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). RTI is considered the practice of offering high-quality instruction and interventions that are matched to students' learning needs, where frequent monitoring guides decisions about instruction (Batsche, Elliott, Graden, Grimes, Kovalski, Prasse, Schrag, & Tilly, 2006). Because of its application to all students, researchers claim that RTI can make both general and special education more effective (Buffum, Mattos & Weber, 2009; Sailor, 2009). During RTI, schools use their resources collectively to intervene early and make instructional changes that can assist struggling students to improve academic and/or behavioral skills (National Association of School Psychologists, [NASP], 2006).

Prior educational reform efforts have demonstrated that implementing change is more complex in actual practice than has been described in the literature. Oftentimes, effective implementation requires fundamental changes in the system and concomitant changes in leadership (Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; Lau, Seiler, Muysken, Canter, Vankeuren, & Marston, 2006; Mahdavi & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2009; Richards, Pavri, Golez, Canges, & Murphy, 2007). To ensure that there is a collective response from core and supplemental support instructors, cultural and structural barriers between general and special education must be eliminated (Buffum et al., 2009). Professional learning communities (PLCs) is one mechanism to create the cultural and structural changes that are necessary to the effective implementation of an RTI program.

The notion of collective responsibility for student learning is a radical departure from the ways most schools have functioned in the last four decades (Buffum et al., 2009, p.48). RTI involves new ways of thinking for staff members. The administrator's primary role is that of a change agent (Lau et al., 2006)

In his study of the RTI model, Lau (2006) identified role changes among the principal, school psychologists, and special education teachers. Researchers have suggested there is a need to know more about the capacity and knowledge of the people on RTI teams (Hawken, Vincent, & Schumann, 2008).

Origin of Response to Intervention

RTI began as a replacement for the traditional IQ-achievement discrepancy criterion that was used to identify students whose academic achievement was significantly less than their intelligence and indicated students' needs for special education services. Two primary criticisms were leveled against the discrepancy model. Researchers observed that it led to a disproportionate placement of males and minority students into special education and it offered no provisions for instructional interventions or educational goals.

In the mid-1980s, RTI was first implemented when educational leaders in the state of Iowa began searching for an alternative to the discrepancy model. They sought to create an "integrated special education and general education service delivery system" (Ikeda, Rahn-Blakeslee, Niebling, Gustafson, Allison, & Stumme; 2007, p. 256). At that time, Iowa implemented a statewide RTI problem-solving model, whereby researchers developed decision-making systems by using data to enhance outcomes for children (VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007). Although a few schools in California had

experimented with other new approaches to replace the discrepancy model, Iowa was the first to implement RTI systematically and statewide.

The progress of one Iowa district became a focus of early research on RTI. Grimes & Kurns (2003) found that the majority (87% to 97%) of administrators and general and special education teachers in the 54 Iowa Heartland Area Education Agency (HAEA) school districts believed that this problem-solving process supported teachers in improving student performance. A combination of staff development, monitoring implementation, and integrating research-to-practice with rigor were necessary for the successful implementation of RTI (Ikeda et al., 2007).

In 1990, Pennsylvania implemented the Instructional Support Team (IST) model in all of its elementary schools over a five-year period. Next, Ohio followed with a similar intervention model. Connecticut, Michigan, New York, and Virginia later replicated previous work, however, on a smaller scale (Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005). Under these models, general education and instructional support teachers worked collaboratively to implement team-developed interventions.

In early 1993, school psychologists in the Minneapolis Public School System (MPSS) followed the lead of the Iowa HAEA districts. In response to research identifying problems with the discrepancy model of qualifying for special education, MPSS requested and received a waiver from the Minnesota state laws that required its use. In its place, the MPSS implemented the problem-solving model, based on the findings from the HAEA research (Lau et al., 2006). The problem-solving approach addressed core concerns at an individual and/or school-wide level by providing interventions for

students rather than focusing on a perceived deficit in the child (Lau et al., 2006). Lau described the steps to the problem-solving model.

1. Define and analyze the problem within the learning context, considering factors such as environmental variables and instructional match.
2. Develop a hypothesis about the problem and determine instructional interventions that may meet the needs of the student.
3. Monitor progress on an ongoing basis and evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions.
4. Continue the cycle as needed.

The models implemented in the Iowa, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Minneapolis schools were later classified as one of two basic approaches. As noted in the steps above, the problem solving RTI (PS/RTI) model required staff to hypothesize about student learning needs while using response data. These models utilized curriculum-based measurement (CBM) for screening and progress monitoring of students. Most of the early research on RTI involved the implementation of the problem-solving model.

The other approach, the standard protocol model (Buffum et al., 2009; Sailor, 2009; VanDerHeyden et al., 2007; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003) used a standardized protocol to examine the nature of student deficiencies and to determine who qualified for specific interventions (Buffum et al., 2009; Sailor, 2009). For example, a school or district could decide that anyone scoring below the 45th national percentile on a standardized reading test would receive a specific Tier 2 reading intervention, and anyone scoring below the 25th national percentile would receive a specific Tier 3 intervention. In this example, the national percentile scores of 25 and 45 became criterion for selecting who would receive the pre-determined interventions.

Some schools and districts have implemented blended models of RTI (Buffum et al., 2009, McCook, 2006; Sailor, 2009). Blended models closely resemble problem-solving models, in that they call for defining the problem, developing a plan, implementing and evaluating it (Buffum et al., 2009). Both RTI models evolved into an early intervention/prevention model for all students (Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009; Sailor, 2009; VanDerHeyden et al., 2007).

The emphasis on prevention and early intervention is an important philosophical difference between RTI and the traditional approach of qualifying for special education based upon discrepancies between IQ and achievement (Lau et al., 2006). RTI supports the No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) goal of increased accountability for all schools because it requires increasing percentages of students in various demographic subgroups to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Howell, Patton, and Deiotte (2008) best described the relationship between RTI and NCLB: RTI is based on the premise that all factions of the educational community collaborate. This process ensures that no group or subgroup of students is left out. RTI can provide measurable outcomes and show the kind of deliverables that NCLB requires.

To promote the concepts of prevention and early intervention in schools, IDEA (2004) also mandated the use of *evidence-based practice* in general education prior to conducting an evaluation for special education. The literature describing RTI has stressed the importance of high quality and rigorous instruction for all students in the core curriculum (Buffum et al., 2009; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2004; McCook, 2006; Sailor, 2009).

Implementing Response to Intervention

As school systems across the nation began implementing RTI, the collaboration required among teachers became a reform initiative that American public schools had never experienced. Implementing RTI represented a paradigm shift for educators, from working in isolation to collaboration, to fulfilling greater accountability and showing increased student achievement. For example, in one California school district, teachers were given weekly release time as they began to implement RTI. Specifically, they had to learn how to collaborate and take responsibility for student learning in the school as well as those in their classrooms (Buffum et al., 2009). In another study on RTI, when teachers and administrators studied assessment results and made necessary instructional practice changes, they noted how it affected their teaching and learning philosophies (Kimmel, 2008).

In Florida, where this study was conducted, RTI was first piloted in 318 schools that used the Reading First program. In 2003-2004, the pilot schools focused on early intervention/prevention by improving core classroom instruction and promoting differentiated instruction. In these schools, RTI replaced the discrepancy model for special education identification. In the first three years, there was a significant decrease in the number of students qualifying for special education services in grades K-3. Two possible explanations were given for this sharp decline. First, was a belief that the actual model led to fewer students with reading difficulty. Second, teachers may have become more confident in their ability to teach students who demonstrated learning difficulty, without feeling a need to refer them for special education.

Pilot studies were crucial because if early interventions were not powerful enough, "then the RTI instructional model could [have] actually delay[ed] the identification of

students for needed instructional services" (Torgesen, 2009, p. 40). Buffum et al. (2009) noted that schoolwide problem solving RTI would be only as effective as its interventions and that ineffective interventions would only lead to equal access to a system of failure.

During the Florida pilot studies, the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) was the universal screening tool. When Florida began implementing RTI statewide in the fall of 2009, the Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading (FAIR) replaced it as the universal screening tool. The FAIR provided very detailed information regarding each student's reading ability. The change in screening assessments was a result of lessons learned from the pilot schools' implementation of RTI. In November 2010, Florida's Problem solving/Response to Intervention (PS/RTI) State Project published a manual to guide and support Florida schools and districts implementing and evaluating their RTI programs. The *PS/Rtl: Evaluation Tool, Technical Assistance Manual* (2010) applied knowledge and information that was gained from the four years of piloting RTI in Reading First Schools. The manual includes tools that were designed to assist educational leaders in evaluating which systemic factors contribute to and/or hinder implementation of PS/RTI practices.

When implementing RTI, school leaders also need to consider sustainability, a concern expressed frequently in the research on RTI. Burns & Ysseldyke (2005) noted the importance of leadership. Leaders' support and presence is crucial to the initial implementation of RTI, and perhaps more important for sustaining RTI practices. Santangelo (2009) found that RTI implementation at one school was not sustained during the second year because of a dramatic reduction in staff and the elimination of

funding. After the district reduced the school's staffing allocation, special education teachers returned to focusing their efforts only on students who were eligible to receive special education services. Santangelo (2009) also reported that there has been insufficient research focused on the factors that influence the sustainability of RTI.

While preparing staff for initial RTI implementation, the district made extensive investments in summer trainings where the research took place. They mandated one week of training for elementary school teams and one week for the secondary school teams. Each school team was able to send up to eight staff members to the trainings, including the school's administration and teacher leaders. A renowned expert who had written a book about the experiences of implementing RTI in another state was hired to facilitate the trainings. Also in attendance for some of the training were three pilot school teams in the district that had already begun RTI implementation. The district also purchased rights to "Direct Step" and required every instructional staff person to complete about eight hours of training from three on-line modules before the end of the first year of RTI implementation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of a first grade teacher team implementing RTI, in order to elucidate practical, authentic recommendations for school leaders that would inform future practices for school and district RTI implementation and sustainability. Qualitative methods for gathering data included focus group interviews, observations of the team analyzing data, a principal interview, and artifacts pertaining to RTI. The conceptual framework for this study was viewing the teacher as a collaborative problem solver involved in shared leadership

during RTI implementation rather than as a practitioner in isolation. Appendix A illustrates the paradigmatic shifts in the teacher's role.

Research Questions

1. How does RTI affect teacher learning?
2. What new tasks and practices are required of teachers with RTI implementation?
3. How can school and district leaders best support teachers in the implementation of the RTI problem solving approach?

Significance of the Study

The knowledge base of RTI in general education is only beginning to emerge (Dexter Hughes, & Farmer, 2008). According to Santangelo (2009), previous research of RTI models relied heavily on surveys and post hoc analysis of district data to support evidence of increased student outcomes. Two limitations of these methods were noted. First, they did not reveal any actual change in school practices. Second, they did not allow for the investigation of extraneous factors such as interactions among team members.

Even though most early researchers on RTI focused on its outcomes, it might be assumed that any process using data to design instruction and student interventions would result in the desired outcomes. However, very few researchers have focused on the *process* of successfully implementing RTI. VanDerHeyden et al. (2007) suggested that future research investigate extraneous factors that influence team decisions as they analyze data.

By studying the process of RTI implementation from the teacher team's perspective, the researcher attempted to bridge the gap between theory and practice. This study sought to discover if and how the process of teacher implementation aided changes in achievement. Researchers have suggested that "future inquiries should

explore how teachers could be supported within a new model of general education accountability and research based practice" (Hollenbeck, 2007, p. 144). Conducting an in-depth study of the teachers' experiences is one way to explore how teachers can be supported during RTI implementation.

Researchers have also concluded that the most important issues for further research are understanding the roles that educators play in the RTI model and how academic and behavior interventions meet individual student needs (Hawken et al., 2008). The significance of considering practitioners as collaborators in RTI research cannot be overstated (Hollenbeck, 2007). Ongoing training in collaborative teaming and progress monitoring might be needed as roles shift and evolve (Marston et al., 2003).

Researchers have been urged to embrace the challenges that affect sustainability of practice and decision-making to better understand how the RTI process can be expanded. Currently there is little research that shows how school based practitioners have been supported while they incorporate RTI within normal school routines (Ardoin, Witt, Connell, & Koenig, 2005, p. 375). As Stacker (2007) has pointed out, "continued research is necessary to guide the adoption of specific RTI practices by states and districts" (p. 57).

Definition of Key Terms

AXIAL CODING. A process of synthesizing the data into a meaningful whole after it has been broken down into codes and themes during initial coding processes.

CODING. A process of sorting and assigning labels to portions of qualitative data that capture the main attributes of the data. There are various methods of coding used in qualitative research.

COLLABORATION. Groups of people engaging in dialogue to work together towards common goals and to reflect on professional practice in order to improve student achievement.

CORE CATEGORY. The category found to have the greatest relevance to all other categories of data, which is used to construct a relationship with the other categories that ultimately lead to a grounded theory. (Otherwise known as the core variable or core theme).

DISTRIBUTED LEADERSHIP. The interaction of leaders and teachers in a collaborative learning environment that influences school and instructional practices throughout the organization.

GROUNDED THEORY RESEARCH. A qualitative method of analysis that culminates in a theoretical construct that explains a social process.

IN VIVO CODING. A method of coding that uses the participants' actual words in the codes to preserve their voices in the research.

PROCESS CODING. Arranging the data that is coded into groups using gerunds, or action words as labels in order to represent a process.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLCs). Teams with a common vision, collaboratively engaging in planning and reflective practice, with a focus on continuous improvements in student learning gains and results

PROBLEM SOLVING RTI (PS/RTI). An RTI framework that requires data based decision-making among teams to meet student academic and behavioral needs. The problem solving process includes problem identification, problem analysis, plan development and implementation, and evaluation of interventions

RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION. A school wide framework to ensure that all students learn, consisting of various processes, including the following:

1. Universal screening to determine how instruction will meet student needs, including differentiating and scaffolding classroom instruction and
2. Selecting appropriate research based interventions to close the learning gaps of at risk students;
3. Regular progress monitoring using formative assessment data to determine whether or not the learning gap is closing and students at risk are making adequate gains, and
4. Collaborative data based decision-making leading to removal of interventions, more intensive interventions, or an evaluation to determine eligibility for special education services for the individual students being monitored.

STANDARD PROTOCOL RTI. An RTI framework that uses pre-determined benchmarks to determine which students will receive specific, pre-selected Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions, with a set duration and frequency based on the common needs of the school

UNIVERSAL SCREENING. Using assessments to determine student progress in relation to benchmarks or standards, leading to the identification of students who will receive interventions and have their progress regularly monitored. In RTI, universal screening is recommended at the beginning, middle and end of each school year.

CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Schoolwide response to intervention (RTI) is a complex process. Sailor (2009) compared it to building an airplane as you fly it. The major components of RTI proposed by Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) involve decision making at several levels: from teams of teachers, to larger teams within schools, and to districts for their role of providing support and resources to the schools.

The purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of a first grade teacher team implementing RTI, in order to elucidate practical, authentic recommendations for school leaders that would inform future practices for school, district, or statewide RTI implementation and sustainability. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of related topics including: (a) a plea for increased collaboration in schools, (b) collaboration in professional learning communities (PLCs), (c) the response to intervention problem-solving model, (d) the role of the teacher in response to intervention.

A Plea for Increased Collaboration in Schools

Reforms that began in 1970s and continued into the 21st century have required teachers to change from working in isolation to collaborating in teams, to working in PLCs and accepting leadership roles within and outside the classroom. Since the 1980s, researchers have recognized the potential that collaboration had to bridge the gap between theory, research and practice. However, without a common planning time and training opportunities, it has been difficult to work towards collaboration (Gerber & Popp, 2000). In addition, a lack of knowledge about collaboration impeded it (Wheelan,

2005). Researchers have suggested school faculties should be familiar with how to elicit collaboration and provide opportunities for teachers to learn to collaborate.

Historically, collaboration in schools was aimed at meeting special education students' learning needs in the least restrictive environment (Gerber & Popp, 2000). Later, research on collaboration centered on encouraging universities, school administration and teacher education programs to work together to improve educational programming for pre-service teachers. In the late 1980s, system wide collaboration between universities and public schools was proposed, and this led to the creation of professional development schools (PDS). Similar to the concept of teaching hospitals, the PDS provided opportunities for teachers to expand their roles and "negotiate the boundaries of theory and practice with immediate, contextual activities" (Dangel, Dooley, Swars, Truscott, Smith & Williams, 2009, p.14). From PDS emerged teacher inquiry and a shift from teacher isolation to a community of collaboration (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001).

Findings from a national survey showed that pre-service special education teachers were still more likely to receive training in collaboration than pre-service teachers were in general education programs (McKenzie, 2009). In response, Kaasila and Lauriala (2010) formed a collaborative, interactionist model of teacher change using university students in the teaching profession. They suggested that educators learn to recognize barriers to collaboration such as previous experiences, expectations of self and others, and fear of failure. The researchers recommended that university-based teacher educators engage in collaborative practices with each other to model how to

increase collaboration among pre-service and experienced teachers (Kaasila & Lauriala, 2010).

In school-based practice, many teachers continued to work in isolation for several decades. The traditional structure and organization of schools did not afford them the opportunity, or time to do otherwise (Levine & Marcus, 2010). Thus, when school reform efforts aimed at improving teacher practice and increasing student achievement was initiated, communities of practice, also known as professional learning communities (PLCs) emerged.

Collaboration in Professional Learning Communities

Prior studies have shown that a culture must change to sustain collaborative learning communities (Hall, 2006). One study showed that a supportive school culture led to increased achievement in reading and math among third, through fifth graders (Strahan, 2003), and confirmed previous findings that developing collaborative work cultures leads to meaningful changes in schools. Collaboration is one of the major tenets of PLCs and at the heart of high performing schools (DuFour, 2004).

PLCs have transformed the rigidity of traditional school structures to organizations that foster cooperation, emotional support and professional growth among faculty and staff (Barth, 2001; DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2005). The "big ideas" that represent the core principles of PLCs are ensuring that all students learn; promoting a culture of collaboration towards school improvement; and focusing on student learning results (DuFour, 2004). These same tenets form the basis for RTI. However, many groups of individuals working in schools have been calling themselves PLCs without actually engaging in the principles of learning communities (DuFour, 2004; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Schools that are not authentic learning communities will have

difficulty implementing RTI successfully in the absence of the solid foundation of a PLC (Buffum et al., 2009).

Three general themes from PLCs are required for successful implementation of RTI: collaboration for (a) curriculum development and implementation, (b) staff development, and (c) opportunities to reflect on and change practices that are required for students' immediate needs. Research has shown that highly functioning teams develop new curriculum, identify innovative teaching strategies to assist lower functioning students, and increase student achievement (Phillips, 2003). The shared responsibility for all students is one of the major cultural changes prompted by RTI. For example, in many elementary schools the responsibility for making decisions about instruction for individual students has expanded to entire grade level teams plus special education teachers and support staff assigned to work with the team.

Group Development, PLC Processes, and Team Effectiveness

Wheelan (2005) pointed out that the idea of using groups to solve problems, coordinate curriculum, or make decisions about school policies is that well performing groups make better decisions than would an individual (p. 24). Prior empirical evidence showed that the team task strongly affects the processes required for its performance (Salas, Sims, & Burke, 2005). Team performance suffers when schools create time for teachers to collaborate without specifying structures and aims (Levine & Marcus, 2010). Understanding tasks the team needs to accomplish collaboratively lends support to more effective performance of the team. Additionally, a task focus helps teachers make the best use of limited time to analyze student data and plan for changes in instruction or interventions collaboratively. Levine and Marcus (2010) suggested that future

research explore if specific collaborative activities are observable in classroom practice, relationships with students or families, or student achievement.

Garmston and Wellman (2008) asserted that ongoing groups must balance three agendas: task focus, process skills development, and group development. Thus, understanding and recognizing the importance of group development is essential for the implementation of RTI. Wheelan's (2005) research confirmed the stages of group development (forming, storming, norming and performing). Unfortunately, most educators have little or no prior knowledge of group development and group process, which affect both team functioning and effectiveness.

Knotek's (2003) ethnographic research examined the efficacy of the social process of multidisciplinary student support teams (SSTs) during the pre-referral process of the traditional (discrepancy) model. In his study of two schools with large numbers of African American students on free and reduced lunch, the problem solving process varied considerably. Outcomes were dependent on the social interactions of the SST and their collaborative ability to plan to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The social milieu of the teams fostered objectivity and rigor, but "sometimes the social process made the team more reflexive and less reflective" (Knotek, 2003, p. 11).

Other researchers examined social validity to describe whether a process leads to the desired results for a particular social group (Mahdavi et al., 2009). They explored the ways collaboration was viewed by the teachers and administrators at two Montana schools piloting the RTI process, and the degree to which stakeholders accepted the RTI process as it was developed at their sites. Their findings showed support for the RTI process. The researchers suggested implementing changes at an appropriate rate

increases the social acceptability of the RTI process and that monitoring and coaching at collaborative meetings can help keep staff on track.

The Emergence of Distributed Leadership

Research reinforced the importance of administrative support and leadership when implementing RTI (Hollenbeck, 2007; Lau et al., 2006; Mahdavi et al., 2009). PLCs are grounded by a belief that it is essential to develop the leadership potential of all staff members and that leadership should be widely dispersed (DuFour et al., 2005; Hoyd, 2004). PLCs support the perspective that "all teachers are leaders" (Barth, 2001; Katzenmeyer & Moller, 2001). Research on RTI has stressed the need for distributed or shared leadership and collaboration, not just for teacher teams, but also for all stakeholders (Buffum et al., 2009; Howell et al., 2008).

For distributed leadership to be effective in schools, formal leaders and teachers must develop capacities in facilitation, interaction, and communication (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson, & Myers, 2007). Leaders influence followers through social interaction. However, the construction of leadership for instruction varies by the leaders' position and is often situated in a variety of types of interactions (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2004). Researchers suggested that future inquiry explore the construction of leadership by studying the everyday interactions between teachers and administrators and teachers and teachers (Spillane et al., 2004). For example, "As distributed leadership practice develops within and between schools, we certainly need to refine the theory...We will undoubtedly need to know more about the impact and effects of different forms of distributed leadership practice on organisational (sic) learning" (Harris, 2008, p.158). Others have called for further research on how to build leadership capacity and/or the capacity of teacher teams.

The Response to Intervention Problem-solving Model

Buffum et al. (2009) proposed that, "RTI can help harness, systematically and coherently, the resources and expertise of specialists in general education, Title I education, English-language learner education, and special education" (p. 23).

Advantages to response to intervention include earlier identification of student problems, more accurate information about students with learning or emotional disabilities, and elimination of the discrepancy model to qualify children for special education services (Buffum et al., 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Howell et al., 2008; McCook, 2006).

Dexter et al. (2008) suggested it is vital to evaluate full RTI models as districts or states implement their unique processes. A full RTI model has six major structural components. Schools must make the following decisions regarding the major structures of RTI:

- How many tiers of intervention to use
- How to target students for preventative intervention (universal screening)
- The nature of that preventative intervention
- How to classify response, (monitor progress)
- The nature of the multidisciplinary evaluation prior to special education
- The function and design of special education (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007, p.15)

The structural components of RTI related to core curriculum, instruction, assessment and intervention are of great importance as well. The differences in schools, districts and states necessitate that decisions surrounding these issues be determined locally. For example, many schools or districts, including the district where

this research study took place, selected a three-tier system of interventions (Buffum et al., 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Howell et al., 2008; McCook, 2006). Yet some researchers have advocated that Tier 3 actually begin the provision of special education services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). An adequate response to Tier 3 interventions represents a questionable basis for assuming that a child does not in fact require special education, when Tier 3 actually resembles the intensity of special education services (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007; Sugai, 2007).

In earlier RTI studies, *researchers* made the decisions about the nature of the intervention and the means to depict the student's progress. In practice, however, this responsibility fell to teacher teams (RTI problem solving teams). Previous research revealed, "As individualized student assessments identify more specific needs, staff will increasingly need to develop and deliver differentiated lessons" (Buffum et al. 2009, p. 84).

A caveat in the law complicated the task of selecting interventions for students by mandating that RTI decisions be based on the child's response to "scientific, research-based intervention" (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2007, p. 10). Researchers have responded by pointing out that teachers need the support of administrators and district personnel to access and learn about a variety of scientific, research based interventions (Sailor, 2009). Further, it was noted that schools have a variety of supplemental interventions to meet the diversity of student needs, and to target the cause of the student's difficulty rather than the symptoms (Buffum et al., 2009, p.93).

For students receiving interventions, the PS/RTI process calls for further decision making based on regular progress monitoring data from six to eight weeks of

interventions. Progress monitoring requires the use of graphs to show the aim and the students' actual progress. This visual tool supports the IDEA mandate that school staff is responsible for keeping parents informed of their child's progress when they are receiving any interventions. Progress monitoring data can lead to a variety of decisions, including: continue interventions (Tier 2), move up to more intensive interventions (Tier 3), or move the student back into the core instruction (Tier 1).

When student progress monitoring data left teachers uncertain about how to proceed after at least 6-8 weeks of interventions, they would request a meeting with the School-wide RTI team (administrators, coaches, school counselor and/or psychologist) to determine the next steps to take. Buffum et al. (2009) cautioned schools not to violate this norm before moving to a more intensive intervention because it could result in due process complaints and delay special education services.

Stecker (2007) suggested basing instruction at Tier 3 on individual student learning needs and delivering it individually or in very small groups. The original expectation for Tier 3 intervention was 50 minutes or longer in duration, five days a week, in groups of three or fewer students (Buffum et al., 2009). This level of intensity complicates school wide structures, because students have to receive instruction in all academic areas within the six or seven hour school day. This logistical problem lent support for the recommendation that the third tier be the provision of special education services rather than having another tier of interventions. Either way schools choose to use the third tier, a benefit for students and school staff in RTI is that new funding allocations within IDEA permit special education teachers to work with all students.

In Florida, if the team decided the child would benefit from special education services after the student lacked sufficient responsiveness to Tier 3 interventions, the intervention strategies and progress monitoring data became a part of the psychological evaluation. If the full evaluation supported special education, progress monitoring data and interventions then became a primary tool for writing the goals and objectives for a student's Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

The progress monitoring data is also important to support fidelity of intervention implementation. While it has been suggested that school administrators monitor interventions, researchers found it was essential to determine the extent to which treatments were implemented and whether they were implemented as intended (Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005). Yet, how to assess fidelity in actual practice remains an unknown (Ardoin et al., 2005; Burns et al., 2005; Ikeda et al., 2003).

The Role of the Teacher in Response to Intervention

RTI has major implications for the educator's workload. Most teachers are trying to grasp how to meet students' learning needs with interventions, stay informed of best practices, and reflect on their own practices (Carney & Stiefel, 2008). A recurrent theme in research is that RTI challenges teachers' organization, planning, and energy level and often leads to frustration (Mahdavi et al., 2009). Another prevalent theme among teachers implementing RTI is how to make efficient use of their time.

The classroom teacher needs to be prepared to provide a range of interventions that may extend outside of their grade level curriculum, or collaborate with other building staff to ensure that student instructional needs are met (Marston et al., 2003). An emphasis on collaboration across disciplines, and across general and special education boundaries has been a challenge for many teachers. Collaborating school wide,

identifying the most appropriate strategies and skills to teach, monitoring individual student progress and using data based decision-making requires a variety of teacher skills. Expertise in curriculum based measurement and data based decision-making is required of all teachers. Ensuring that such skills are included in general and special education teacher programs is a topic that requires research (Richards et al., 2007).

The selection of interventions and methods of monitoring the response to the interventions often requires collaborative decision-making. Other decisions that require the collaboration of grade level teams are how to: improve core curriculum instruction; group students for core reading instruction; and regroup them for Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. The school administrators, reading coach, reading resource and special education teachers often are involved in decision making to ensure their school follows the recommended structures of PS/RTI. Administrators seek the input of teachers regarding how to implement RTI, and use their input and feedback to ensure continuous improvement of the system.

Summary

Fuchs and Fuchs (2007) proposed that RTI requires decision making at several levels: from teams of teachers, to larger teams within schools, and to districts for their role of providing support and resources to the schools. PLCs lay the foundation for collaboration and teacher learning that are essential to RTI. Distributed or shared leadership is believed to increase the likelihood of successful and effective RTI implementation. How to best support teachers and prepare future teachers for facilitating student learning in the RTI framework remains unknown.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research was to provide a comprehensive description of a teacher team's experiences in the second year of RTI in order to illuminate practical, authentic recommendations for school leaders to guide the implementation and sustainability of RTI at school and district levels. The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the setting and participants, the research design, methods of data collection and analysis, and methodological rigor.

Setting

The setting for this study was a Title I school in a small rural town in Florida. The district offices are located in an affluent city with very different demographics than the locale where the study took place. Five years ago, the school received a grade of A from the state, although it has maintained a C for the past few years. The overwhelming majority of students in the research site (89%) are Hispanic. Black (African American and Haitian) students comprise about 10 percent of the student population and Caucasian students are the greatest minority (less than 3%). Seventy three percent of the students live in homes where the first language is not English. Compared to the other five elementary schools in the rural town, this school has the lowest percentage of students on free and reduced lunch (93%). Approximately 11% of the students are in special education. This school does not have any full time special education classrooms since the entire school district has been using an inclusion model to teach those students who receive special education services. Only a few schools in this district had students assigned to full time special education classrooms.

Thirty three percent of this school's students are classified as migrant. Thus, their families migrate to other areas to find work, typically in farming. Most migrant students return to this community during the months of October and November, and leave during April or May when farm work in the area subsides. Migrant students typically demonstrate difficulty learning the English language and show inconsistencies in their academic achievement. It is common for migrant students to attend two or more schools each year. They begin the school year in one school, and return to this community mid-year. Depending on where their families move to find work in the spring, they may actually end the school year in yet another school. The high migrant population complicates implementing RTI, because the school must accommodate them into existing intervention groups when they return to this community several weeks after school has begun in the fall.

Participants

In order to increase the objectivity of the study, it was determined that the teacher team being studied should not be at the school where the researcher was employed. Potential sites included four elementary schools. However, when the district office approved the study, they selected the school where the study would take place. The school principal was in his fourth year. He had the longest tenure as an elementary principal in the community aside from one other with 30-year tenure who lived locally.

After identifying a school for the research site, purposive sampling was used to select information rich cases for in-depth study (Patton, 2002). The principal ruled out asking the kindergarten team since their focus was more on language development than RTI. However, the first grade team volunteered to participate. As noted by the

principal they were one of the most stable teams in the school. They were selected for the study. Among the team were seven first grade teachers.

The researcher met with the participants to describe the study and seek consent for participation, for taping interviews and conducting observations. The consent form appears in Appendix B. All teacher names used in the study are pseudonyms because the consent included a confidentiality agreement. Demographics of the teacher team were also gathered when the participants signed consent forms to participate in the study. A copy of the form used to gather participant demographics appears in Appendix C. At this first meeting of the teachers, the researcher began to establish comfortable and trusting relationships with the teacher team.

The first grade teacher team consisted of six females and one male. The team leader moved to an ESE inclusion position during the middle of the school year. However, she continued as the team leader until the end of the school year. She remained closely connected with the team, continued to provide special education services to first and second grade students and served as the mentor for the new teacher who replaced her.

The total number of years of experience among the teachers ranged from two to nine years, an average of 5.3 years. On average, the number of years teachers had been in this school was 4.1 years, while their average years of experience teaching in this grade level were 3.6 years. All seven participants held endorsements as English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) teachers, and had completed the training required by the state of Florida to work with children whose first language was not English. All participants held a bachelor's degree in either elementary education or early

childhood education and held Florida certifications in the same. Two of the teachers held certifications to teach students with disabilities, and one of the teachers held a gifted endorsement. Two of the teachers had master's degrees (one in School Counseling and one in Reading), and three of the teachers were currently working on their master's degrees in Curriculum and Instruction (C & I) with a reading endorsement. All teachers on the team had also completed the three RTI online training modules from Direct Steps, mandated by the district. Table 3-1 shows the educational background of each participant.

Table 3-1. Participant experience

Last Name	Total Years Teaching	Years Teaching at the Site	Total Years Teaching This Grade	Other Grades Taught	Certifications/ Endorsements Held	Other Degrees Held	Taking Classes for MA Degree
Moore	4	4	3	4th, 2nd	ESOL, ESE		C & I
Smith	2	1	1	3rd	ESOL, Gifted, Counseling	M. S. Counseling	
Leader	7	7	6	ESE	ESOL, ESE		
Jones	4	3	3	Pre-K ESE	ESOL		
Brown	9	4	1	5th	ESOL		C& I
Davis	2	2	2	N/A	ESOL		
Miller	9	9	9	N/A	ESOL	MA reading	
Range	2-9 years	1-9 years	1-9 years				
Average	5.3 years	4.1 years	3.6 years				

Research Design and Data Collection

Grounded Theory Research

Originating from the work of Strauss and Glaser (1967), the purpose of grounded theory research is to "demonstrate relations between conceptual categories, and to specify the conditions under which theoretical relationships emerge, change, or are maintained" (Charmaz, 2010, p. 675). Grounded theory methods are essentially, "a set of flexible analytic guidelines that enable researchers to focus their data collection and

to build inductive middle range theories through successful levels of data analysis and conceptual development" (Charmaz, 2002, p. 507). Literally speaking, theory arising from grounded theory research is "grounded" in the views of the study participants. Grounded theory is the preferred method for this study because the intent of grounded theory "is to explain a process"; the process specific to this research was the implementation of response to intervention.

Creswell (2008) noted, "as a systematic process, grounded theory exhibits the rigor quantitative researchers like to see in an educational study...the data collection process contains a self-correction nature" (p. 447). However, Creswell also cautioned a weakness of grounded theory research is that varied approaches developed over time could lead to confusion about which procedures would best produce a well-developed theory.

Data for this study came from multiple sources: three focus group interviews, observations of team meetings, an interview with the school principal, and analysis of artifacts pertaining to RTI. Each data collection method is explained in detail in the following sections. Each focus group interview and observation lasted between forty-five and fifty minutes, except for the final focus group interview, which was seventy-five minutes in length. The total time spent with the team was two hundred and fifty minutes (4 hours and 10 minutes). The interview with the principal was fifty minutes, thus the total time spent in the field with all participants three hundred minutes, or five hours.

Focus Group Interviews

The objective of focus group interviews is to gather high quality data in a social context where people hear their views in the context of others' views (Patton, 2002). The focus group therefore aligns with the assumption that knowledge is socially

constructed. Focus groups provide insights into the attitudes, perceptions, and opinions of participants in a natural setting where participants are able to influence each other (Krueger, 2004). The opportunity to influence each other creates a space for insightful sharing that would not be available in individual interviews or other forms of data collection. During the interviews, the facilitator focused on understanding the thought processes of the participants rather than on helping the group reach consensus (Krueger, 2004).

The initial questions were pilot tested with primary level teachers to determine if other questions were needed. The questions that were used for the focus group interviews are in Appendix D. Questions for the two subsequent focus groups arose from the data analysis of the prior focus group interview. Care was taken to create a trustworthy, open environment where participants would not feel judged and honest opinions would flow freely. The focus groups began with welcoming and thanking the participants, followed by an overview of the topic, setting of ground rules, and then the first question. During the first focus group, the researcher sought information about each teacher's role within the response to intervention process. The researcher wrote field notes in addition to tape-recording the sessions. Pauses and probes helped solicit additional information from the group. Comments and gestures were self-monitored by the researcher to avoid communicating agreement or dissent with what was being shared (Krueger, 1994). Both video and audio recordings were used to capture the teachers' words and body language in order to ensure that technology problems would not affect the research during the first two focus group interviews. Later, only audio

recording was used because the researcher could accurately recognize their voices. Verbatim transcriptions of the teachers' spoken words were typed into protocols.

Thick, rich descriptions of the dialogue, written field notes from observations and memos were sorted, categorized and rearranged into themes (coded). The constant comparative method involved the continuous review and analysis of the codes to seek better understanding of the categories and their relationships to one another. After each focus group interview or observation, the descriptive data was assimilated with the prior coding in order to analyze the findings holistically.

Participant Observation

In order to gather data from different settings, the participants were observed in two problem solving team meetings where they used data to make decisions as a team. Each observation followed the first and second focus group interviews. Field notes in the form of running records with thick, rich descriptions that included both verbal and non-verbal observations were documented. The researcher transcribed the taped dialogue and written observations, and then coded, categorized, and embedded them into the prior coding. Data analysis followed, continuously using the constant comparative method. During the first observation, the participants used recent benchmark testing to determine which students would begin receiving interventions from the math coach. Since the second observation occurred near to the end of the school year, the teachers analyzed a variety of academic achievement data along with behavioral observations to create new heterogeneous groups of students for next year's teachers.

Principal Interview

The researcher conducted an individual interview with the principal following all focus groups and observations to contextualize the results, and to obtain a leadership perspective on the school's RTI implementation. The interview with the principal sought to substantiate common themes of the teachers' reports. This included exploring the support that teachers received from school leadership, such as the opportunities for professional development. Data from the written transcripts of the interview were coded and the codes were combined with existing coding entries using the constant comparative method of data analysis. The questions for the principal interview are in Appendix D.

Field Notes and Memos

Field notes are descriptions of what the researcher observes in a qualitative study (Patton, 2002). They include everything the researcher deems to be important, including experiences and thoughts while collecting data. Field notes, kept in the form of running notes during the sessions with the participants throughout the research process, contributed to the validity of the research. Memos written in a research journal depicted the researcher's *reflections* during the interviews, observations, coding and data analysis. Memos included ideas and hunches that arose through reflection and data analysis. It was suggested, "The comments and thoughts recorded as field log entries or as memos are links across your data that find their way into the analytical files" (Glesne, 2006, p. 148).

The field notes and memos became a part of the data gathered throughout the study. Field notes recorded researcher observations during each interview and problem solving team meeting. Memos recorded researcher thoughts and insights after reflecting

on data collection and analysis. As suggested by Bogden and Biklen (2007), the memos included analysis of emerging themes, thoughts regarding methods, dilemmas or conflicts, awareness of assumptions, or points of clarification.

The field notes and memos provided insight into relationships among the themes created in gathering and coding the data. They also contributed to triangulation of instrumentation (the use of multiple sources of data) to facilitate accuracy and dependability of the findings. "Triangulation recognizes the multiplicity and simultaneity of cultural frames of reference through which social events and institutions are possible" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 300). Additionally, the combination of multiple methodological practices and perspectives adds rigor, breadth and depth to inquiry (Flick, 2002).

Data Analysis

The initial coding method was in vivo coding, literal coding, to "preserve the participants' meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself" (Charmaz, 2010, p. 55). In vivo coding is appropriate for all qualitative studies, but since it involves using the actual language of the participants, it is particularly useful for studies that want to "prioritize and honor the participants voice" (Saldana, 2009, p. 74).

The coding process involved forming initial categories of the data followed by using the constant comparative method of data analysis. The constant comparative method (CCM) entailed continual review and reflection of data to determine the most appropriate thematic groupings. After coding the data from the first two meetings with teachers, process coding further categorized the data into themes using gerunds (action words) for data analysis. Corbin and Strauss (2008) noted process coding is particularly appropriate for qualitative studies that search for "ongoing action/interaction/emotion

that is taken in response to situations" (p. 96) which in this research was the teacher team's responses to RTI implementation. Additionally, process coding was the primary method of coding used by this researcher in the qualitative studies completed in the doctoral coursework. Saldana (2009) supports the use of more than one coding method. He cautioned that in vivo coding might limit the researcher's perspective since it honors the participants' voices. "Sometimes participants say it best; sometimes the researcher does" (p. 76).

The constant comparative method of data analysis continued until all the data was categorized into themes and subthemes. Thematic analysis is "a strategic choice as a part of the research design that includes the primary questions, goals, conceptual framework and literature review" (p.140). Saldana further noted that developing themes requires comparable reflection on participant meanings. After gathering and coding all the data from the focus group interviews, observations, principal interview, artifacts, field notes and memos, final themes emerged using the second cycle coding method of axial coding. Axial coding is a process of synthesizing the data into a meaningful whole after it has been broken down into the codes and themes during the initial coding process. Axial coding also involves using the constant comparative method of data analysis, in order to identify a central theme and the relationships among other (sub) themes uncovered in the research. To complete the analysis, a visual paradigm portrayed the theory generated from the data collection and analysis. The theory describes the interrelationship of the themes related to RTI implementation.

Methodological Rigor

The research began with a pilot focus group interview of five primary level teachers at a different school to test the interview questions and add to the

methodological rigor of the study. Teachers in the pilot study focused on the research-based interventions. In particular, they noted the students' success with the Leveled Literacy Instruction (LLI). Based on the findings of the pilot study, the focus group interview questions were modified to ensure capturing all relevant information. The primary change was the addition of questions pertaining to the use of research-based interventions, which contributed important findings to the results of the research.

Creswell (2003) noted that in qualitative studies, validity does not carry the same connotations as it does in quantitative research. He explained that terms such as trustworthiness, authenticity, and credibility are commonly used in qualitative research, yet he also noted that validation is an active part of the process in grounded theory research. Creswell identified eight research strategies that check the accuracy of findings and suggested using at least three of these strategies in a research study. These strategies are considered best practices in qualitative research. In Table 3-2, the researcher describes how six of Creswell's validation strategies were used in this study.

Table 3-2. Strategies used to check accuracy of findings

Strategy	How the Strategy was Applied
Triangulation	Different data sources were used to build coherent justification of themes. Sources included group interview data, individual interview data from the school principal, observations of team problem solving meetings, a review of artifacts pertaining to RTI, and researcher-constructed field notes and memos written throughout the study.
Member-Checking	Data from field or participant experiences were coded and used to develop emergent findings. At subsequent meetings, emergent findings were shared so that participants could respond to their accuracy.

Table 3-2. Continued

Strategy	How the Strategy was Applied
Using thick, rich descriptions to convey findings	In data collection and analysis, and in writing the final report, thick rich descriptions were preserved and used to give the discussion an element of shared experiences.
Clarify the bias the reader brings to the study.	Presented in the discussion of findings. The researcher is a doctoral candidate with an EdS in Educational Leadership. Having served five years on a leadership team at a neighboring elementary school, the researcher has had varied opportunities to learn about RTI. The researcher believes knowledge is socially constructed.
Peer Reviewer	Another student in the doctoral cohort served as a peer reviewer who corroborated the findings by reviewing and assessing the data to determine if she came to similar conclusions of themes created from in vivo coding, process coding, and data analysis.
External Auditor	A fellow employee served as an external auditor to review the research project and its conclusions and corroborated the findings.

Grounded theory research lends itself to the formulation of questions that emerge from data analysis; it adds depth and meaning to successive data collection. Creswell (2008) noted that the emerging design is a process "in which the inquirer refines, develops and clarifies the meanings of categories for the theory" (p. 450). The use of an emerging design, gathering data over time and analyzing it continuously, added to the validity of grounded theory research.

Some experts have claimed that qualitative research is never replicable, yet Patton (2002) noted that carefully documenting the procedures for generating and interpreting the data help to establish that the evidence to support the claim is dependable. Dependability was built into the study by generating clear research

questions, seeking multiple sources of data from different settings, and providing opportunities for member checks and peer reviews. The participants reviewed contingent findings from data analyses in succeeding focus group interviews and the researcher gave them opportunities to provide feedback. The researcher shared a diagram of the grounded theory with the participants to verify the themes and relationships developed were representative of the thoughts, attitudes and perceptions of the group as a whole. Miles and Huberman (1994) stated, "Feeding findings back to informants is a venerated, but not always executed practice" (p. 275).

Researcher Qualifications

I have completed several courses in qualitative research methods and data collection during my doctoral studies and received training in use of the constant comparative method of data analysis. In these courses, I worked on two qualitative studies with others in a doctoral cohort, one pertaining to theory generation of elevator behavior and the other gathering qualitative feedback about the courses taken in this cohort. In both studies, the professor gathered and coded all individual research findings, which allowed each person to compare their own conclusions with the collective findings. In this process, I was able to validate that my individual findings were consistent with the collective findings of the cohort.

As a school counselor and a Licensed Mental Health Counselor, I received considerable and relevant training in verbal and behavioral observations, facilitating groups, group processing, and group development. Some of this training was in a group practicum at which time I co-facilitated a court ordered group of males charged with domestic violence. Three years as a bereavement counselor allowed me to perfect my group therapy skills and fulfilled the requirements for state licensure as a Mental Health

Counselor. To date, I have twelve years of experience in school counseling, where I have also facilitated social skills and anger management groups. Extensive experiences facilitating groups for both children and adults lend credibility to the process skills needed to facilitate focus group interviews. I have also conducted and presented two qualitative studies during my years as a bereavement counselor, one at the Association of Death Education National Conference, the other at the International Conference on Death Education.

Additionally, serving on the school leadership team afforded me the opportunity to work closely with the school wide implementation of PS/RTI. I have facilitated progress-monitoring meetings with three different grade level teams and provided Tier 2 interventions to small groups of students who were at risk. I continue in those roles today. Rather than expecting team leaders to take on the role of facilitating progress monitoring and decision-making, the principal at my school delegated each person on the leadership team to work closely with one grade level team to give them the support they needed in the process of RTI implementation.

Limitations

One of the weaknesses of using focus groups is the unanticipated volume of data and the complexity of the analysis. This problem has actually led to some accusations of researchers overlooking important evidence, ignoring critical factors, or twisting facts to meet earlier assumptions (Krueger, 1994). A fellow doctoral student, who served as the external auditor of the research, checked the coding and themes to help prevent such errors in analyzing the data. Additionally, the dissertation committee provided insight regarding the need to continue analyzing the findings from the study, some of which were unexpected.

One limitation of this study was that site-based decision-making allowed schools to make decisions democratically and based on their unique school cultures. Thus, PS/RTI was structured differently in schools within this district and across the state. "The implementation of RTI at the child, classroom, school, and district levels will be decidedly varied in form" (Kame'enui, 2007, p. 6). Adding to these variations is the fact that RTI is relatively new in the practice of the teaching profession. Thus, someone reading this research would have to determine if the findings from this study would be applicable to his or her situation.

Another possible limitation of the study was that each of the participants on the team had fewer than 10 years of teaching experience. There is a possibility that this team was less resistant to change than teams with veteran teachers. Often teachers with more experience have a greater tendency to resist change (Ubben, Hughes, & Norris, 2007). Teachers with the greatest longevity sometimes react to implementing change and doing away with it before they have an opportunity to evaluate its effectiveness (Carter, 2007).

The total time spent with participants, five hours, may be seen as a limitation. However, in examining research on focus group interviews, the recommended length for each focus group interview ranges from thirty minutes to three hours. Krueger and Casey (2009) pointed out that one challenge in conducting focus groups is to balance what you would like to do with the realities of time and budget. While the original intent of this research was to have 60 to 90 minute focus group interviews, a compromise was reached since some of the teachers worked in after school programs, others already

worked past contract hours, and others were taking classes towards their Master's degrees.

Due to teacher time limitations, the focus group interviews occurred during the teacher planning time, which was the first period in the morning. Having less time for the focus group interviews was a compromise. Teacher input received earlier in the day was likely to be more positive, compared to what might be shared after a long day of teaching and working with children. Having a large team of seven participants allowed for increased input into the focus group interviews, which also compensated for the decrease in desired time for them. Further, including an additional focus group interview might have been seen as essential to gathering more data. However, the data gathered from the three focus group interviews and two observations reached the point of theoretical saturation, where no new information was being offered and the full range of ideas had been previously expressed by participants (Kruger & Casey, 2009).

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

The purpose of this research was to provide a comprehensive description of a teacher team's experiences in the second year of response to intervention (RTI) in order to illuminate practical, authentic recommendations for school leaders to guide the implementation and sustainability of RTI at school, district or statewide levels. The answers to the research questions listed below are discussed first in this chapter.

1. How does RTI affect teacher learning?
2. What new tasks and practices are required of teachers with RTI implementation?
3. How can school and district leaders best support teachers in the implementation of the RTI problem solving approach?

Findings from the principal interview follow and contextualize the findings of the teacher team within the larger system implementing RTI and undergoing change. The chapter concludes with a description of the core theme and grounded theory that emerged from the study.

Research Question 1: How does Response to Intervention affect teacher learning?

Early in the research, Ms. Moore expressed that RTI implementation gave her the motivation to be a better teacher, despite the fact that it was challenging.

Ms. Moore: RTI looks good on paper, and makes you more aware. But in reality, it is very challenging and frustrating. But it does...it makes you want to be a better teacher.

All of the teachers on this team concurred with her. This was one of the most insightful findings regarding the impact of RTI on teacher learning, something that I reflected on frequently when coding and analyzing the data from the focus groups and observations.

Mr. Smith provided another example of motivation to be a better teacher. When I first met the team, Mr. Smith was proud of his ability to gather student data. He had recently learned to enter student data into the district based Data Warehouse (DW) system. This teacher's motivation to learn anything pertaining to the RTI framework was evident throughout the time I spent with the team. He also expressed a desire to grow and advance his ability to analyze data using DW.

Mr. Smith: So where I want to grow is data analysis, and then I have been briefly introduced into how to get onto Data Warehouse (DW). I know it is out there but I don't know how to do it-plotting data points to be able to look at trends. So, I'm great at collecting the data, but when I have it, I do not know what to do with it to analyze it.

Mr. Smith followed up on his desire to learn more about analyzing data. During the last focus group interview, he reported that he attended the Data Warehouse training for progress monitoring held at the district office, a training opportunity that was self-initiated. He excitedly shared how meaningful the training was and felt so accomplished that he offered to show the team how to gather, input and analyze data in DW.

There are two possible reasons the teachers might have felt that RTI motivated them to be better teachers. First, engaging in the process of analyzing data showing learning gains can be motivating in and of itself. Because data is central to tracking student progress in the RTI framework, it is reviewed more frequently. These reviews allow teachers to keep a closer eye on learning gains and differentiate or change instruction accordingly. In the following excerpt, Ms. Jones expressed the importance data analysis plays in differentiating instruction for students with varying needs.

Ms. Jones: I think that by analyzing the data more closely, you can learn, I can...I have been able to, like, tailor differentiated instruction even better. I don't think it's changed that much, as I differentiated before RTI, but I think that extra analysis of the data gives you more information to tailor your differentiating to your students' needs.

A second reason RTI might have motivated teachers is that the principal explained to them that RTI is really what great teachers have tried to do for many years. Therefore, the teachers might have believed that engaging in this process was an avenue to help them become great teachers. Regardless of the reason for the motivation, it was a surprising and positive finding that the entire team concurred RTI made them want to be better teachers.

I reached other conclusions as I analyzed the data and relationships of the codes and themes from a process-oriented perspective. The teachers used different strategies to learn about the RTI framework. They collaborated, asked questions, initiated self-training opportunities, and observed other teachers. As they learned about RTI using these strategies, they also returned to one or more of the strategies to comprehend the new knowledge they constructed about the RTI framework. Thus, the teachers engaged in a cycle of continuous learning: learning new information and returning to the learning strategies to further their understanding of the new knowledge.

The findings revealed that independent learning led to interdependent learning. In fact, all teachers on the team displayed great willingness to share new information or new learning with their team. Other examples that show evidence of participants sharing their own learning that led to opportunities for interdependent team learning follow. For example, in the first focus group interview, Ms. Brown explained that her former fifth grade team had shared students across the grade level. By the last focus group meeting, the teachers on this team were also planning to share students across the grade level to teach reading when they returned in the fall. In addition, Mr. Smith shared what he had learned while taking classes for gifted endorsement. He suggested to

teachers that they consider student mastery of skills and give advanced, independent work to those students who have mastered specific standards. This idea served to remind the participants that differentiation is not just for students who are struggling but also for students needing advanced learning opportunities and challenges. In the team setting, this idea also helped the teachers recognize that all learning experienced by teachers ultimately pertained to RTI in one way or another, because RTI is about ensuring that all students learn.

These examples, among others, supported the main tenet of social learning theories, that meaning is socially constructed. Therefore, in a collaborative team setting, anything learned independently and shared with the group had the potential of becoming an opportunity for interdependent learning. There were also a few instances where individuals learned from prior group knowledge. For example, the two newest teachers did not know the district used to provide an increased number of professional development (PD) offerings for teachers compared to the present time. Also, one teacher did not know that DW had been updated so that progress-monitoring data could be entered to provide student comparison graphs. The relationship between independent and interdependent learning appeared to be interchangeable.

Another positive effect on teacher learning was that RTI necessitated that the teachers worked collaboratively. This finding supports prior research (Buffum et al., 2008, Howell et al., 2008) which indicated that collaboration and professional learning communities (PLCs) are central to the successful implementation of RTI. Ms. Brown shared this notion in the first focus group meeting.

Ms. Brown: So we ended up sharing strategies, so if it's done the way it's supposed to, teachers are going to work together; they have no choice.

Teaching in isolation does not fit into the paradigm of RTI. Developing an effective learning community is the foundation for everything that teachers must be able to do when implementing RTI (Buffum et al., 2009; Hollenbeck, 2007; Howell et al., 2008; Phillips, 2004). The findings showed that when teachers collaborate, everybody in the learning community benefits. Findings from this study revealed that the teacher team formulated their own learning community, which became a place where they collaborated to improve student learning, planned and made instructional decisions, and continued their own learning. The creation of hands-on experiences to assist with language development exemplified how the teachers collaborated to improve student learning. To plan, each teacher posted lesson plans for one subject area on the shared computer drive, and explained them to the team so they could collaboratively develop common homework and assessments used for the whole grade level. They pointed out this was the first year they provided the same homework across the grade level, and they were pleased with the outcomes of doing so. In the following dialogue, Ms. Brown and Ms. Moore shared how the team collaborated to support each other's learning and to increase student learning.

Ms. Brown: Also, we teach the same lesson, we plan together, so if something is not working, about the way we introduced the lesson or the kids are not getting it we talk about that. How did they do with you because my kids didn't get that"?

Ms. Moore: We get ideas, we say, well I did it this way. We revisit the lesson and try it another way and see if it works better using a different strategy someone else recommended.

All of the teachers claimed that they contributed meaningfully and equally to the team and collaborated to support the team endeavors. They also expressed a desire for more time to collaborate, if only there was more time available. As the focus group

interviews progressed, it became evident that they had grown as a team over the course of the school year. In doing so, they noted that they provided more consistency in planning and teaching across the grade level this year.

Also evident was that the team had created trusting relationships, which allowed both individuals *and* the team to develop and evolve. The findings showed that the team was the primary source of support for the teacher participants. I witnessed effective communication and collaborative skills throughout all of the interactions the participants had with one another. At different times in the interviews, the participants spoke of how valuable the team was to them. Mr. Smith explained what he believed was the value of team work.

Mr. Smith: I think, its um, I think it's great how this year, in our team, with every choice, and I am saying every, I believe that, like every choice or decision that we made, we were all consulted and everybody that seemed to need...Ok, I can speak for myself, but, I know for myself, I felt like I was heard, even though I am very detailed, and I felt like I was valued, because I felt like I had input, and it seems like all of our decisions were made together.

The team made repeated comments about a school norm that their principal implemented with the inception of RTI; that teachers should always turn to their team first. The high frequency of mentioning this normative strategy led me to reflect on this norm throughout the data collection and analysis processes. At times, I viewed this as an effective leadership strategy that reinforced the team's functioning as a learning community, one that contributed to the development of the team as they learned how to work within the RTI framework. The number of times the teachers mentioned using this strategy made it clear that the team took it very seriously.

In summary, the findings showed that RTI had a motivating effect on teacher learning. RTI also reinforced the need for teacher collaboration, which provided

opportunities for the teachers and the team to grow and develop. At the last focus group interview, the participants spoke passionately about new ideas they hoped to implement in the following school year. Almost all of the ideas they presented in the last focus group related to improving the efficiency of their team functioning in order to support student learning.

Research Question 2: What new tasks and practices are required of teachers with RTI implementation?

RTI requires teachers to analyze data from universal screenings in the beginning, middle and end of the school year. The Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading (FAIR) is the universal screening tool used in Florida. The problem solving response to intervention (PS/RTI) process is dependent on analyzing student data from universal, standardized and formative assessments. The process requires teachers to make instructional decisions based on the data. Instructional decisions must be made for the class as a whole (Tier 1), for groups of students with similar needs (Tier 2), and for individual students with more intensive needs (Tier 3). For reading, the team felt competent in their abilities to gather data from a variety of sources, including running records, fluency levels, and Fountas and Pinell (F&P) reading levels. F&P levels are benchmarks that provide recommended reading levels for the beginning, middle, and end of each school year, ranging from A (kindergarten readiness level) to Z (seventh grade and beyond).

Each teacher stressed the importance of differentiating instruction to meet their students' learning needs. They were confident with their instructional abilities to differentiate and believed that using student data helped them to improve their ability to

differentiate instruction to meet students' specific needs. A few teachers on the team mentioned the importance of scaffolding instruction for students. One of the strategies they learned at a recent extensive writing training was the frequent use of common and/or hands-on experiences for children. This strategy assisted them as they thought about teaching. First, it propelled them to create more opportunities to link lessons with prior knowledge and second it helped them to develop common language for the lessons. Subsequently some of the teachers had begun to provide these experiences more frequently in their lessons.

Teachers were accustomed to receiving professional development on teaching strategies or methods that applied either to the core curriculum or to differentiation. Thus, the only real change in practice related to Tier 1 (classroom instruction) was using data more proficiently to inform and differentiate instruction. Therefore, the teachers specifically expressed that they needed new skills to accelerate the learning of students with learning gaps, most of whom received Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions in small groups.

Analyzing Data

Teachers had trouble trying to analyze the data. They lacked the skills necessary to engage in collaborative data based decision-making. This was essential for monitoring student progress and making sound instructional decisions. They had difficulty using data to make decisions concerning which students would receive Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions. I recorded the following memo after coding the first observation of the team analyzing data to determine which students would begin receiving math interventions: "*Entering the coding from the last observation I am struck by their high*

levels of uncertainty. It never had occurred to me that teachers might need PD in how to analyze data collaboratively."

To make instructional decisions and decide whether students need classroom instruction or placement in intervention groups, teacher teams must first know how to analyze the data. This was a fundamental problem facing the research participants. It led to many of their challenges in implementing RTI, including their frustrations concerning those students who were receiving interventions and continued to struggle.

Evidently, the team needed more training in data based decision-making to make the decisions necessary to carry out their plan of sharing students across the grade level for reading instruction next school year. They also needed to learn how to analyze data so that they could make decisions for regrouping students when the migrant students entered the school later in the fall and after intervention groups were already established. Compounding the decision-making process were the size limitations for Tier 2 and 3 student groups that required making room for new students who had more intense needs by removing students who were making some progress in intervention groups.

When the teachers were discussing progress monitoring in the last focus group interview, they recommended the idea of providing teacher training for data based decision-making. The excerpt below validated my observations that the teachers were aware of their lack of proficiency in data based decision-making, particularly for progress monitoring. It also confirmed that the team leader was not sure of her own role as the facilitator of the team since she expressed a need for training in the facilitation of progress monitoring meetings.

Ms. Moore: It does not have to be the team leader, but someone on the team should know how to facilitate those meetings [data analysis meetings], what needs to be discussed.

Ms. Leader: And there should be training for it [interrupted]

Ms. Miller: Yea, how should that discussion go, what needs to be decided, and whose role is what or does everyone have a different role in that meeting.

Progress Monitoring Plans and Technical Skills

Progress Monitoring Plans (PMPs) were needed for almost all students receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions. Developing a PMP involves identifying the specific problem, hypothesizing why it was happening, and determining the appropriate interventions for the students. For students at Tiers 2 and 3, teachers first had to learn to how to develop and correctly enter Progress Monitoring Plans (PMPs) in the DW system. The study participants were at different stages in learning these skills. Although site based training was offered at the beginning of the school year, teachers did not have enough early practice with these skills to become proficient.

RTI implementation requires computer literacy for reporting and analyzing student data. Another technical challenge for many teachers was learning how to construct the area in DW to report progress-monitoring scores. Entering assessment data in DW for progress monitoring generated comparison graphs automatically through computer programming. Comparisons of student progress would become necessary later on if the RTI process led to a formal student evaluation for special education services. Learning to set up DW to record progress monitoring scores required attending staff development at the district offices during non-working hours. Because of this, only a few teachers received the necessary training. In fact, no one on this team had learned how to enter progress-monitoring scores in DW until the end of the school year. At the last focus

group interview, Mr. Smith shared what he had learned at the training and offered to teach it to the others on the team.

As shown in other RTI research, (Carney & Stiefel, 2008, Mahdavi et al., 2009) teachers felt challenged by a lack of time to learn things that were required for RTI. For these teachers, finding time to learn the technical skills for DW compounded their frustration. Therefore, most teachers continued to keep progress monitoring data in excel spreadsheets or hand written records, in the event it would become necessary for an evaluation, or for moving a student from one tier to another.

Research-Based Interventions

The participants expressed a genuine concern about the new practice of identifying and using *research-based* interventions required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 that endorsed RTI. However, the teachers perceived the intervention selection as a daunting task, specifically because they had no training that encompassed the use of research based interventions. The participants had no idea how to find research-based interventions, and expressed concern because they believed that implementing these interventions would require additional training.

Ms. Jones: But like, other things, they say it has to be research based. I don't even know where to start, and I guess obviously that's been one struggle. I don't know where and what's research based and how to get it and how to implement it; usually there's training you need to use it, so... [silence].

Unfortunately, the team opted not to receive specific training for Leveled Literacy Instruction, an intervention that was piloted that year at other Title 1 schools with great success. Notably, the Leveled Literacy Instruction (LLI) required several hours of teacher training over the course of one semester. The teacher team believed the training might not be worth the time because it would have taken them away from

teaching duties for a significant amount of time. The primary interventions the first grade teachers and reading teachers used were Reading Mastery, Triumphs from the Treasures reading program, and the new Ticket to Read online resource.

The first grade teachers were impressed with the support they received from the reading resource teachers and the reading coach. They repeatedly noted the contributions of the "lit lab" teachers (reading resource teachers and the reading coach) to their team and students. It was clear the reading coach and reading resource teachers had decided which interventions to use for specific groups of students. In the elementary schools in this district, the reading coach and reading resource teachers had expert knowledge of the various reading programs available in their school.

However, the classroom teachers did not have any training on other programs available for use, despite the fact that they were responsible for providing Tier 2 interventions along with the reading resource teachers. The teachers remained concerned about their lack of knowledge regarding research-based interventions in the second year of RTI. The teachers needed training so that they would be able to identify, select, and provide appropriate research based interventions that address specific learning problems. Based on my experience in the district, the school reading coach and reading resource teachers were best equipped to offer this training.

The participants were also concerned about the practice of applying interventions *with fidelity*. They were concerned specifically that their time constraints in accomplishing their teaching duties would affect the fidelity of the intervention implementation. Their concerns about fidelity provided evidence that the teachers had solid knowledge about RTI. Yet, they had difficulty with its actual implementation.

Time Management

During the course of this study, time management skills that would have benefitted the teacher team were identified. First, the team would have benefitted from using grade level sets of data, rather than classroom sets, to make decisions to form intervention groups. In lieu of professional development, the study participants would have benefitted from having specific directions on how use the data to select students for an intervention group. They also would have benefitted from having the principal, or someone else in leadership, answer their questions about how to analyze the data before their data analysis meetings. However, this would have required them to be more assertive about letting the school principal know what their needs were. Using any of these strategies would have saved the teacher's time when they were selecting which students would get math interventions. As mentioned before, and in prior research, teachers found that time became a precious commodity since the inception of RTI.

At the last focus group interview, some of the participants recalled using protocols for team meetings in the past. One teacher shared her action research findings that verified the benefits of using protocols for team meetings. All teachers on the team agreed that using protocols would support them and keep them on task when they were monitoring student progress or making data based decisions. Using an agenda for their team meetings would have provided similar support in keeping them on task. In fact, some school principals required teachers to submit agendas and/or minutes from their team meetings. During this discussion, the teachers also talked about assigning roles to each team member. They understood that assigning roles, such as timekeeper, recorder, and facilitator, would have increased their efficiency during meetings. It was evident the teachers recognized these time management strategies could have

increased opportunities for collaboration, a desire they expressed in the second focus group interview.

Following is a list that summarizes new teacher practices for the implementation of RTI identified in this study. The teachers practiced some of the activities during the course of this study, and some were actions they anticipated using the following school year.

1. Analyzing data to differentiate and scaffold instruction of the core curriculum, and target specific skills to accelerate learning for students with learning gaps.
2. Analyzing data to determine how to share students across the grade level.
3. Analyzing data to determine how to group students for Tier 2 interventions and to identify which students will receive Tier 3 interventions.
4. Regrouping students receiving interventions outside the classroom to make room for migrant students who arrive later in the school year.
5. Developing effective PMPs, and align formative assessments for progress monitoring with the identified problem and the intervention selected to close the learning gap.
6. Using DW to record progress monitoring data and generate graphs that included comparisons with other students' data (who were receiving the same intervention).
7. Implementing interventions *with fidelity*.
8. Using time management strategies to conduct team meetings more efficiently.
9. Distributing roles among the team, such as timekeeper, taskmaster, and record keeper to document decisions reached and items that need follow-up.

There was also one strategy identified in the research that the teacher team had not yet employed. Selecting interventions is an important step in the PS/RTI process. Notably the teacher participants desired to have the knowledge of which reading interventions were available in the school. Without knowing the options to select from, they did not have the ability to select appropriate interventions for students in Tiers 2

and 3. Unfortunately, plans to train teachers for this important practice were not mentioned. The reading coach and reading resource teachers made the determination of which interventions to use and when. However, the teachers wanted to make these decisions since it was related to the accountability they had for student learning gains. The inability to select from a range of interventions, and the teachers' uncertainty about analyzing data to make decisions revealed weaknesses in the delivery of staff development and in distributed leadership in the school and district.

Teacher Leadership

Being a leader among teaching colleagues means relentlessly pursuing whatever it takes to increase student learning and knowing when to ask for support. Yet, the high stakes environment that ensconced teachers' work seemed to heighten their sense of vulnerability and impeded their ability to get administrative support. Perhaps their difficulty stemmed from a school culture that did not permit teachers to feel safe enough to seek instructional help for their students.

Throughout the study, I became concerned that the norm of turning to the team first for support was a double-edged sword because it may have prevented teachers from reaching out to administration and other leadership for help. Perhaps, teachers' implicit apprehension about seeking help from the administration was driven by a fear that if they asked for assistance, they would expose the whole team's lack of knowledge.

The team did allow me to see their vulnerabilities during the study. Also, the focus groups gave them an opportunity to voice their concerns and stress why they needed additional support. Distributed leadership can only work in an environment where information flows in many directions and all are willing to communicate collaboratively

across the organization. However, based upon the teachers' responses it seemed unlikely that school leaders had cultivated an environment that encouraged distributed leadership. At the time of this study, the teachers felt trapped in a cycle of frustration because of their lack of knowledge and training. The findings suggested that school and district leadership lacked a firm commitment to ensuring that teachers had the fundamental knowledge that they needed to implement RTI.

True leaders do not stand by and wait for things to happen, they influence others and initiate changes towards continuous improvement, in this case the RTI process. Lacking the necessary training, the teachers used trial and error to make many decisions, rather than making meaningful, effective data-based decisions to improve student learning. In terms of overall implementation, teachers in this study lacked knowledge of staff roles and school processes for RTI. They also lacked proficiency in selecting interventions, data analysis, and data based decision-making.

Prior research on RTI has stressed the importance of administrative support and leadership (Hollenbeck, 2007; Lau et al., 2006, Santangelo, 2009). Research also revealed a need for distributed and shared leadership (Buffum et al., 2009, Howell et al., 2008). Based on my observations, the teachers on this team had leadership potential, but there was no development of their leadership capacity in the process of implementing RTI.

The teachers exhibited effective communication and collaborative skills that are essential for PLCs. This led to individual growth and the development of the PLC. However, no one on the team emerged as a leader. Although the team leader was an excellent listener and facilitator, she had no more knowledge or training than anyone

else did. Ms. Miller spoke about becoming next year's team leader, and as the most experienced teacher on the team, she contributed some meaningful ideas during the focus groups. She was also very vocal in expressing her frustrations with RTI implementation. However, like the present team leader, she showed no signs of leadership capacity, or an ability to get the support and training needed to alleviate the team's frustrations.

Research Question 3: How can school and district leaders support teachers in response to intervention implementation?

The findings from the teachers revealed that the best ways for school leaders to support them in RTI implementation was to provide the following.

1. Provide additional instructional staff, have processes and specific directions in place, and increase follow up from administration.
2. Provide increased professional development (PD) during working hours, or compensation for attending during non-working hours, and allow teachers to indicate what type of PD they needed.
3. Provide tangible resources such as flowcharts, decision-making guides and a list of intervention tools.

Direct Support from School Leadership

In coding and using the constant comparative method of data analysis, I divided each of the main themes above into two subthemes: having and lacking. The lack of support that teachers received from administration was evident when three-fourths of the codes (66 out of 88) that appeared in the category, "lacking support", specifically pertained to a lack of administrative follow up or direction. While the teachers frequently noted their appreciation for support from the literacy team, they did not mention having the support of their school administrator or leadership team. However, they pointed out that if the principal wanted a specific child to receive special education services, then

the RTI process led to an evaluation. The teachers saw that as a disadvantage because there were so many other students who continued to struggle while receiving intervention support.

Four themes emerged regarding the support teachers wanted from school leadership. The teachers felt an increased level of accountability for student learning and they wanted the principal to support them by hiring additional *instructional* staff to provide Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. It was apparent that changes in classroom instruction (Tier 1) would not close learning gaps quickly when almost fifty percent of the student population was below grade level in reading. Title 1 school staff works hard to meet the needs of higher numbers of students with unique needs, such as migrant students and English Language Learners (ELL). However, the return of migrant students to school later in the fall became a significant problem at the research site, as noted earlier. Their return caused a delay in receiving interventions while teachers and the literacy team decided how to adjust their intervention groups and accommodate them. Buffum et al. (2008) and other researchers suggested the intensity of Tier 3 interventions require 30 to 60 minutes per day in groups of three or fewer students. Having additional instructional staff would alleviate the problem of moving students out of intervention groups prematurely in order to make room for new students with more intense needs.

In one of the memos after a focus group meeting, I noted the teachers had high levels of uncertainty and frustration that prevented them from asking for an RTI meeting to discuss the lack of success some students were having. This finding provided

evidence that the teachers' struggles affected the students. In the following excerpt, one teacher expressed her frustration about the lack of direction the teachers received.

Ms. Leader: Not knowing what to do next is very hard, and waiting...not knowing what the school psychologist is doing with the student we referred, not knowing if we are even going to have a meeting this year to follow up with that student. So far, nothing has been scheduled.

The principal explained that conflicting information coming from two district departments hindered his ability to provide clear directions about RTI procedures to the teachers. Reflecting back, I wondered if the principal was buffering his staff from the problems stemming from district leadership. The research participants also wanted an increased administrative presence in their classroom and follow up to help them be accountable for student learning. The teachers wanted to be asked about how specific students were doing. Just being asked by school leaders to explain the decision-making process relative to RTI, would have given them an opportunity to voice their concerns and have meaningful dialogue with leadership. Ms. Brown explains what the teachers wanted from their school leaders.

Ms. Brown: What I would like to see next year is, being that information is given, is, somebody needs to come in- like I have a list, I have 4 kids who I know need to start the RTI process, and...I don't know-someone from the RTI team needs to come in and, you know, check on these kids. [long pause]

Yes, follow up and say, I see you have four kids that need to start the RTI process, how are they, what are they doing, what are you seeing so far? I mean like how many Dolch words- just a quick 5 minutes.

If someone in leadership did not recall a child they had previously discussed, teachers began to feel alone in their struggles. Some of them felt like it was the first time they were talking about a child when they brought up a student's name for a second or third time. Ms. Miller echoed this dilemma.

Ms. Miller: So I know they have like 700 or more kids to take care of, but it would be nice if somebody on that team takes it as their job to come back and check.

A more frequent leadership presence and follow up would have increased teacher perceptions that school leaders supported them and felt as accountable for student learning as they did. However, it became evident during the study that the teachers felt as if they were carrying the "burden" of accountability on their own shoulders. Ms. Moore expressed her thoughts about accountability and support.

Ms. Moore: I don't think there's been enough of a focus on RTI schoolwide or district wide, to give enough information to the teachers. And you were saying it makes you more accountable, but I think it also puts a lot more pressure on teachers. We *are* accountable and we always have been, but we used to get more assistance and help. And I feel it's harder to get that now. And you don't know what to do, so it puts a lot more pressure on us to try to solve the puzzle and put the pieces together...Cuz we are by ourselves now and I feel more alone now.

Other experienced teachers on the team also expressed they felt more alone now. However, they all reiterated they received excellent support from their own team and the literacy team. With effective leadership support, the teachers might not have experienced the high level of frustration about students who continued to struggle while receiving interventions. The lack of support contributed to inadequate feelings the teachers experienced.

Ms. Leader: The main problem is to keep collecting data and change interventions and watch children continue to struggle, and yet nothing happens.

Ms. Moore: You begin to feel like a failure as a teacher.

Several teachers on the team concurred that the lack of administrative support led to feelings of failure.

The teachers also wanted additional staff members to be present at RTI meetings. From a leadership perspective, servicing students typically takes priority over

attendance at meetings if teachers have to leave during instructional time. However, the RTI framework requires collaborative decision making. It was troublesome to the teachers that a lack of full representation at meetings led to increased work for them.

Ms. Davis: I think it would be nice to have a bigger committee sitting there, discussing these kids that are RTI.

Ms. Moore: Cuz they're always saying, email this person, cuz they weren't there, so we need to go get information from them. And if they were there, they could just write it down. There's always a question to get answered.

Ms. Jones: Compared to last year, it was more searching, it was more trying to find things our your own, or trying to find someone who knew how things worked.

This notion of searching and finding information on their own gets to the heart of the effects of lack of school leadership. The lack of leadership or resource personnel at RTI meetings added to the teachers' workload and time constraints. Ms. Davis' remark illuminated how a lack of direction and support hampered the team.

Ms. Davis: I feel like you have to be constantly going around and bugging, bugging people to get any answers, to figure out what to do.

A lack of administrative support led some teachers to believe that leadership did not share a sense of accountability for student learning. However, during my interview with the principal, he shared that his own job was dependent on being accountable for student learning gains.

Professional Development

The principal believed that the initial professional development (PD) for district staff was beneficial. However, he concurred with the team's perception that there was a lack of school and district level PD opportunities. The teachers believed that the district PD offerings this year were fewer in number than in previous years, and they agreed more PD was necessary to make RTI work successfully in their school. During the last

focus group, they reported wanting available training during contract hours or receiving compensation to attend trainings during non-working hours. In prior years, when the overall economy was thriving, it was customary to give teachers in this district stipends for most PD offered during non-working hours.

The team wondered how decisions were made to determine what PD was offered. They wanted to have more input into what trainings were offered district wide. Many of the challenges that they experienced could have been alleviated by shared decision-making. Even a simple survey could have allowed the teachers a voice and simultaneously revealed their needs anonymously.

In the second year of RTI implementation, the district and schools needed to provide initial RTI training for new teachers and ongoing training for those trained previously. While site based decision-making was becoming the norm, school leaders had difficulty providing the necessary trainings for their staff while making the systemic changes needed to support the RTI framework. Therefore, school leaders asked the district support staff to provide more training. By the middle of this school year, the district increased their professional development offerings on RTI. Examples of some of these trainings are in Appendix E.

The teachers stated that district trainings seemed to disappear after the first year of RTI implementation. However, the economy was in a downward spiral during this time causing many districts to make large budget cuts. A lack of funding for ongoing trainings was also possible because of the large investment for hiring a national expert to facilitate the initial trainings for the district.

Tangible Resources

A few months before beginning this research, the district published and distributed an RTI decision-making guide in response to growing awareness that teachers and other school staff were having difficulty implementing RTI. The decision making guide is shown in Appendix E with other artifacts from the research. However, this resource did not make it into teacher's hands at the research site or at the school where I worked. Many principals had reached consensus that the guide was so complicated it might increase the high stress levels teachers were already experiencing. Meanwhile, the teachers in the study struggled without a visual aid depicting the RTI process and flow of decision-making.

The study's findings suggest that other tangible resources could have assisted the teachers. For example, a less complex guide to RTI decision-making could show which types of data to use for various decisions. The need for such support became evident during the two observations of the team analyzing data, because the teachers continuously questioned what they were doing. Following is list of examples of the type of information that would have assisted the teachers with decision making.

- To determine which students would receive Tier 2 or 3 interventions at the beginning of the year, use a grade level list of FAIR results and running records.
- To determine if a student could move out of level 2 interventions and receive only the core curriculum, use progress monitoring data in addition to F& P reading levels and fluency rates.

- To determine which student to move from a Tier 3 intervention group to make room for a new migrant student, use comparison progress monitoring data from formative assessments in addition to reading levels and fluency rates.
- To determine how to share students across the grade level for core curriculum, use grade level sets of FAIR data and reading benchmark data, (rather than trying to work with six class sets of data).

A tangible resource discussed earlier in these findings was a list of interventions available at the school and district. The facilitator of the initial district training suggested that each school create this resource so everyone in the school knew the interventions available and to guide them in selecting the most appropriate one to use. However, at the time of this research, such a list had not been developed or given to the teachers in the study.

Team meeting protocols were another tangible resource noted earlier in the findings. The teachers saw the value that protocols would have in keeping them on task to make efficient use of their time. The teachers also wanted someone to model a few protocols so they could choose one specifically for their team's use.

To summarize what teachers need from school and district leaders in RTI, the research revealed the need for several types of direct leadership support. These included having processes in place, increasing leadership presence in classrooms, following up with teachers about the progress of specific students, and providing more instructional staff to assist with interventions. The findings also revealed teachers needed increased professional development for the new teacher practices necessitated by RTI, and tangible resources to guide implementation and decision-making. Figure 4-

1 presents a summary of the key findings brought forth by the participants in the research.

What Teachers Need From School & District Leaders		
<p>Professional Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initial and ongoing - Site and District based - During Paid time - Teacher input into selection of offerings 	<p>Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Specific direction and processes in place - Increased presence in classrooms - Following up to help with accountability - Additional Instructional staff 	<p>Resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Time, Money for PD - Intervention training and lists of options - Protocols for team data discussions - Other tangible aids, eg. decision making guides

Figure 4-1. What teachers need from leadership to implement response to intervention

These findings concur with prior research showing that professional development is one of the most important factors for successful RTI implementation (Jacobs, 2008; Sailor, 2008; Shores, 2009). The findings also support earlier reports that leadership plays a key role not only during the implementation of RTI, but also in sustaining it (Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005). However, the teachers noted that this year seemed more frustrating and problematic than the first year of implementing RTI. Using the familiar analogy that RTI implementation is like building the plane as you fly it; during the second year, the construction plans were not even strong enough to get the plane off the ground.

Findings from the Principal Interview

Surprisingly, the principal did not feel buy-in was a problem in implementing RTI at his school. The teachers did not reveal any problems with buy-in either. Perhaps the staff had already bought into the school vision. Perhaps the lack of problems with buy-in resulted from the principal sharing his own belief that RTI is what great teachers have

really tried to do for generations (differentiate instruction to meet individual student needs). He explained to his staff that they had already been doing a lot of what is required for RTI, but they were taking it to the next level. The ideas he shared with this staff were consistent with the finding noted earlier that RTI motivated teachers to improve their teaching abilities.

In practice, RTI requires major systemic change to implement and sustain. The principal confirmed it had been challenging to implement the RTI process. The principal confirmed that implementing RTI was much more challenging than getting buy in.

Principal. I think the roadblock we hit was actually trying to implement it and track it and have the right data to show that it's either working or not working. So that's been the issue really, implementing it, not buying into it."

The principal acknowledged the need for more professional development and district support, noting specifically that ongoing training fell short. The plan to use a "train the trainer model" to teach other staff about RTI did not work as intended for several reasons. Only a select team of representatives from each school attended the initial training, and some of those teachers had moved on when school started in the fall. The principal said the plan for trained staff to teach those who did not attend the district training did not work as planned because one week of training was not enough to gain the level of competency needed to train others. He also stated it was difficult to maintain ongoing professional development in his school because high staff turnover created a situation where teachers were at varying levels in their learning.

The principal reported that he presented general information during faculty meetings, such as describing what Tier 1 and Tier 2 look like. He asked teachers to bring their information and data to team meetings and he presented them with "if-then"

scenarios. He also noted he was inclined to provide "a kind of informal professional development" to teacher teams or individuals as issues arose.

Initially, principals in Title 1 schools in this district focused on providing site based professional development to improve Tier I (core classroom instruction) at their schools. The RTI trainer hired by the district had suggested that the top priority for Title 1 schools should be to improve core instruction (Tier 1) so that fewer students needed Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions. Therefore, the principal sent several teachers to an intensive writing training at another local school. He also allowed a few teachers to attend a cooperative learning training, and he was committed to providing this training for his staff at the start of the next school year. He believed this training would help teachers with academics and student behavior, since cooperative learning often leads to increased student engagement.

An important way to improve classroom instruction (Tier 1) is to hire highly qualified teachers. The principal noted that staff turnover led to a lack of highly qualified veteran teachers in this community. Experienced teachers tended to move into the city after a few years of making the long commute. New teachers were likely to replace the veteran teachers because of their willingness to take a position anywhere to begin their teaching careers. According to the principal, the fact that beginning teachers were continuously replacing the veteran teachers added to the challenges of improving the core curriculum.

The problem of high turnover is likely to grow unless the district finds a way to attract and keep veteran teachers at schools in this unique community. With teacher merit pay replacing the traditional compensation structure in Florida, some veteran

teachers have already begun to position themselves at top schools with a history of consistent learning gains. Many teachers believe that working at schools with consistent learning gains will improve their chances of increased compensation when merit pay begins.

District Problems Revealed

The principal agreed that ongoing professional development was lacking across the district since the inception of RTI. He also reported that *consistency* was the kind of support he needed from district leadership and he explained the situation best in the following excerpt.

Principal. I think we need just ongoing staff development and support, and training. I think that's really the most important thing. Oh, and I think consistency across the district, so we're all doing the same thing, not necessarily a coined program but just so the language is universal and the process is as universal as it can be. I think that's important because then you get buy in, and then we're all speaking the same way...(long pause as he ponders where he is going with this)... because I think a lot of times when you're on different pages, it's fragmented and when you're fragmented it's not strong and it doesn't work as well as it should.

The principal's thoughts about RTI implementation being fragmented were consistent with the teachers' experiences implementing RTI. Teachers were frustrated with a lack of school procedures and processes that were essential to the success of RTI. In the last focus group interview, the teachers expressed their need for the structure that stemmed from knowing school processes. Their lack of knowledge about RTI processes impeded them from proposing an RTI meeting to discuss ways to help struggling students. In one of my memos after the second focus group meeting, I recorded the nature of this problem: *"It seems that the uncertainty and lack of support is causing teachers to sort of give up on moving a child through the RTI process"*.

While problems at the district level were outside of the principal's control, he could change other things at his school. Just as teachers must identify their students' learning gaps, so too must school leaders identify the learning gaps of their teaching staff. The primary gaps in teacher learning uncovered in this research centered on data analysis, data based decision-making, and selection of research based interventions. The principal could have provided training for his teachers in all three of these areas without district support. However, this required that he take the time to identify systemic problems and teacher weaknesses in order to provide school based trainings that supported RTI implementation.

There was no evidence to suggest that the school as a whole was functioning as a learning community. If this had been the case, the collaboration across teams would have produced an environment where answers to questions were easy to access. Instead, the teachers were further frustrated by having to search for information on their own. Had the school developed a resource for sharing of intervention knowledge, teachers would have been spared taking their time to do so. Unfortunately, the teachers felt unsupported and solely accountable for student success.

The principal explained that because of the individuality of each school across the district, site based decision making had been the norm for quite some time. Yet, with RTI implementation, principals needed consistency and guidance from district leaders. Without having a similar plan that was implemented throughout the district, the principal could not even turn to his own peers for support, because every school had different interpretations of the RTI framework. The principal remarked that other principals in the district also shared his concerns because they identified RTI as the number one issue

when school administrators were asked to list their greatest concerns at their end of year meeting.

The Systemic View

Additionally there were some specific events happening with district leadership that created the fragmentation and inconsistency the principal discussed. The principal reported that the special education department was reluctant to take responsibility for RTI implementation district wide. Therefore, RTI was implemented under the leadership of Curriculum and Instruction (C&I). This situation perplexed the principal because in every instance of his prior learning about RTI, special education departments were in charge of RTI implementation. Two years after RTI implementation, top administration mandated that the district's special education department take responsibility for RTI.

Fragmentation at the district level led to an inconsistent understanding that underscored implementing RTI. The curriculum and instruction department interpreted RTI in terms of a prevention/intervention model and the special education department viewed it as a replacement for the discrepancy model of evaluating students for special education services. This disconnection at the district level also created a situation where teachers, school psychologists and school leaders all had different understandings of RTI processes and implementation. Where I worked, this lack of common understanding led to conflicts between the school psychologist, who was responsible for supporting teachers in gathering the necessary information to write evaluation reports, and the specialist responsible for ensuring that school based decisions for students followed special education laws.

The principal described a similar scenario at his school. The new school psychologist assigned to his school lacked a thorough understanding of RTI. Although

she had clinical experience, she had to learn how to write school evaluation reports. According to the principal, the fragmentation at the district level complicated the psychologist's ability to learn the job. Additionally, the new district coordinator for school psychologists lacked experience in district leadership. This scenario explained the teachers' complaints about the lack of communication from the school psychologist. It confirmed their thinking that the psychologist was also struggling with her role in the RTI process.

Many challenges, including a lack of school and district leadership, led to the frustration and uncertainty the teachers divulged during the research. Systemic change requires that all components of the system work together, however, this was not happening at the time of this research. There was a lack of leadership exposed at three levels in the system: the teacher team, the school administration, and the district administration. However, the teacher team's lack of leadership was a direct result of leadership deficiencies at the school and district levels.

Someone at the district level needed the foresight to realize the complexity of RTI implementation would conflict with the norm of site based decision-making. All components within the larger system needed a collaborative focus to support RTI implementation in the schools. Therefore, one of the most crucial findings from this research was that effective planning, within and between the various departments at the district level, was necessary to lay the groundwork for RTI implementation.

A lack of stability in top district leadership also contributed to the challenges that year. In the fall, the school board informed the superintendent that his contract would not be renewed. Although his contract ended June 30, 2011, an interim superintendent took over his position in the spring shortly before this research began. The Chief

Instructional Officer and Chief Operations Officer, who the exiting superintendent hired immediately upon his arrival to the district, also left shortly after his departure.

The turnover in top district leadership during the second year of RTI implementation created greater chaos in a system that was already struggling to find equilibrium after implementing major change. All of these events were happening in the months immediately preceding and during this research. The principal informed me that the stress levels of staff across the district increased, with concerns about job stability. Nearly everyone in a leadership position was apprehensive about reassignment or demotions. The repercussions from the lack of fluidity in top leadership led me to conclude that districts could best support schools, teachers, and students by making necessary changes in key leadership positions before implementing major change initiatives such as RTI.

When asked how much the turmoil at the top level of district leadership affected RTI in his school setting, the principal reported that the divide between RTI and special education personnel was a greater problem than the superintendent's leaving. The inconsistencies stemming from the lack of ownership for RTI by special education had a domino effect on people throughout the system, including teachers and students. On the other hand, when the superintendent left the district, there was a less significant impact on teachers. In fact, during the focus group interviews the teachers never even mentioned the fact that the district was searching for a new superintendent.

School systems, like people, can learn from their mistakes, but the costs can be high for all stakeholders, especially the students. The outcomes from standardized testing reflected the impact of the challenges on student learning. While the research

site maintained its "C" rating from the state of Florida, the district as a whole moved from an "A" down to a "B" rating this school year.

Site Based Challenges

In addition to the obstacles stemming from district leadership, the principal faced the impending retirement of two key people on his leadership team that spring. It was troubling to me that the teachers only mentioned the RTI facilitator one or two times and they never mentioned their school counselor. It concerned me that the teachers did not view their school counselor as someone who could support them with RTI. I later made the connection that the counselor and RTI facilitator already had one foot out the door by the time of my research in the spring.

The teachers had mentioned the RTI facilitator was providing tier 3 interventions. When I inquired about this, the principal informed me that the RTI facilitator was also a part time ESE teacher. When I asked about this person's role, the principal informed me that since this person held a doctorate degree, he was allowed to experiment with some new interventions. However, the principal also reported that plan backfired at times when teachers were informed that they did not have exactly what they needed to complete an evaluation for a student's' special education determination.

Howell et al. (2008) suggested the importance of administrators monitoring the fidelity of RTI and intervention implementation, so I followed up with the principal on this topic. He explained that he monitored the fidelity of the interventions by reviewing the data the teachers produced, and he noted that the teachers needed to demonstrate they were collecting data and putting it into graph form. He added that they met every 5 weeks to monitor progress and look at how students are doing that are going through

the RTI process. He stated that in these meetings, the RTI team offered suggestions to teachers to increase the likelihood of student learning gains.

Burns and Ysseldyke (2005) noted it was essential to determine the extent to which treatments were implemented and whether they were implemented with fidelity. The principal could not have determined fidelity of implementation by reviewing progress-monitoring data and discussing students in meetings. One way administrators monitor the fidelity of implementation is with frequent classroom walkthroughs. However, other researchers advocated for more research to determine how to assess fidelity of implementation in actual practice (Ardoin et al., 2005; Burns & Ysseldyke, 2005; Ikeda et. al., 2003).

When asked how he improved as a leader since RTI implementation, the principal informed me that he got more involved in school processes this year. He stated that it required him to get "in the trenches" more frequently. Some of his thoughts about his own growth in the RTI framework are revealed in the following excerpt.

Principal. It's gotten me more involved in a lot of pieces of the school processes that I might have relied on other people to do, you know, like LEA people. Dealing with ESE, I find myself getting more involved and learning more about the process, because this all ties in with RTI. I'm, um, learning more about data collection, more than I already knew, and learning more just about individual kids, more detailed wise because I'm more involved when I'm working with the teachers and trying to find out what works and what doesn't work. Then, just being able to share successes that one teacher had with another teacher who might be in the same situation a year later with a different child...

This principal's perceptions that he was in the trenches and more involved was contrary to what the teachers had experienced— feeling very alone this year. The teachers in the study repeatedly conveyed a lack of support from leadership. In the interview, the principal mentioned that his job requires a lot of juggling. One way or another, his priorities led to the teacher participants lacking process knowledge and the training and support they needed for implementing RTI.

When asked how he provided support for his teachers, the principal explained that he spent a large share of his Title 1 money on additional staff. Yet, the teachers specifically wanted more *instructional* staff, because non-instructional staff could not provide interventions. The need for more instructional staff was one more obstacle to making the RTI system work in Title 1 schools.

If the principal hired an additional teacher to provide interventions, he would have to eliminate two non-instructional positions. Non-instructional staff members are valuable resources to the school staff because most are bilingual. They also provide stability in the school because most of them live in the community and they do not have the same degree of turnover as instructional staff. Replacing two non-instructional staff members with one teacher might require buy-in from the entire school faculty and lead to a rivalry between instructional and non-instructional staff. Before taking this step, the principal would have to weigh the loss of two non-instructional staff members and the potential of systemic chaos with the benefits of hiring another *instructional* staff member.

The principal was aware that teachers wanted better support and specific answers to their questions. He explained that he came up with an RTI flowchart for training at the beginning of the school year, but teachers struggled with all the gray areas where things did not fit into the flowchart. He also said teachers are used to having specific directions spelled out for them, as in the former CAST process (Child and Adolescent Study Team) that they used to identify students for special education services before RTI. As opposed to this former linear process, in RTI teachers were now required to make instructional decisions based on student data, monitor student progress, and make further decisions about intervening based on the progress monitoring data.

Planning for the Third Year of RTI

The principal planned to provide additional support for his teachers the following school year. His plan indicated he recognized the value of teachers learning from each other and that he was interested in the school's growth as a learning community.

Principal. And one thing we're going to do this year is take teachers that are having success with something and opening a meeting with it and sharing it with everybody, you know, this is what I do, what do you think? Or, this may be good idea... If they hear it from other teachers, they will be more likely to use it.

By the spring of the year when this research took place, the district revealed a plan to eliminate the existing RTI facilitator positions in a few of the Title 1 schools and the ESE specialist positions, which were part time at every school in the district. The ESE specialists who were monitoring the compliance of special education laws in schools were given the option of interviewing for the new position, "Intervention Support Specialist" (ISS), assigned full time to every school across the district. In many instances, including the research site, the specialist working part time at a school was rehired as the ISS for the following year. The teachers and principal at the research site were excited and held high hopes that this person could provide the support and knowledge they needed to implement RTI more effectively.

According to the principal, the creation of this position resulted from a directive that the special education department take over responsibility of RTI. The new position provided an avenue for consistent information to flow between the district office and the schools, which was lacking at the time of the research.

The new ISS position and the inclusion of RTI into the district special education department were viewed as key strategies to resolve the problems that arose in the first two years of implementing RTI across the district. Additionally, there were hopes that the new superintendent would bring stability and strong leadership to the district.

Despite the challenges that arose during the first two years of RTI implementation, the principal and teachers ended the school year with confidence that the impending changes would lessen the challenges of implementing RTI the following school year.

Generating a Grounded Theory

After analyzing relationships in the data following the coding process and categorizing data into themes, I initially concluded that "coping" was a major theme. The largest majority of codes from the data arose from a lack of leadership support and teachers coping with feelings of frustration, confusion and uncertainty.

The three categories of leadership support the teachers wanted were described in detail earlier; professional development, direct leadership support, and tangible resources. Examining relationships and synthesizing the data to make meaning, I concluded these three categories of unmet teacher needs were the direct result of a lack of proactive leadership voice at the school and district level. These challenges led to teachers coping with feelings of frustration and confusion, uncertainty about processes, roles, and data based decision-making, and concern for students who did not make progress while receiving interventions. After categorizing the data, the broader category encompassing all the teachers' struggles and frustrations was labeled, "coping with the effects of leadership challenges at the school and district level." The largest majority of data, over 100 coding entries, pertained to the frustrations and struggles the teachers were coping with. Consequently, coping with the effects of leadership challenges became the core theme.

In this research, the teachers used four different coping strategies: collaborating, questioning, initiating professional development, and observing other teachers. Since the four coping strategies led to teacher learning, they were equivalent with learning

strategies. Thus, another process-oriented theme that emerged from the research was "using coping strategies to learn." As noted earlier, teachers engaged in a continuous cycle of learning as they used these strategies to comprehend new knowledge they constructed about RTI. Figure 4-2 depicts the process of RTI implementation that arose from the research findings. Each component of the diagram is discussed in detail in the following section unless it was presented in the earlier findings.

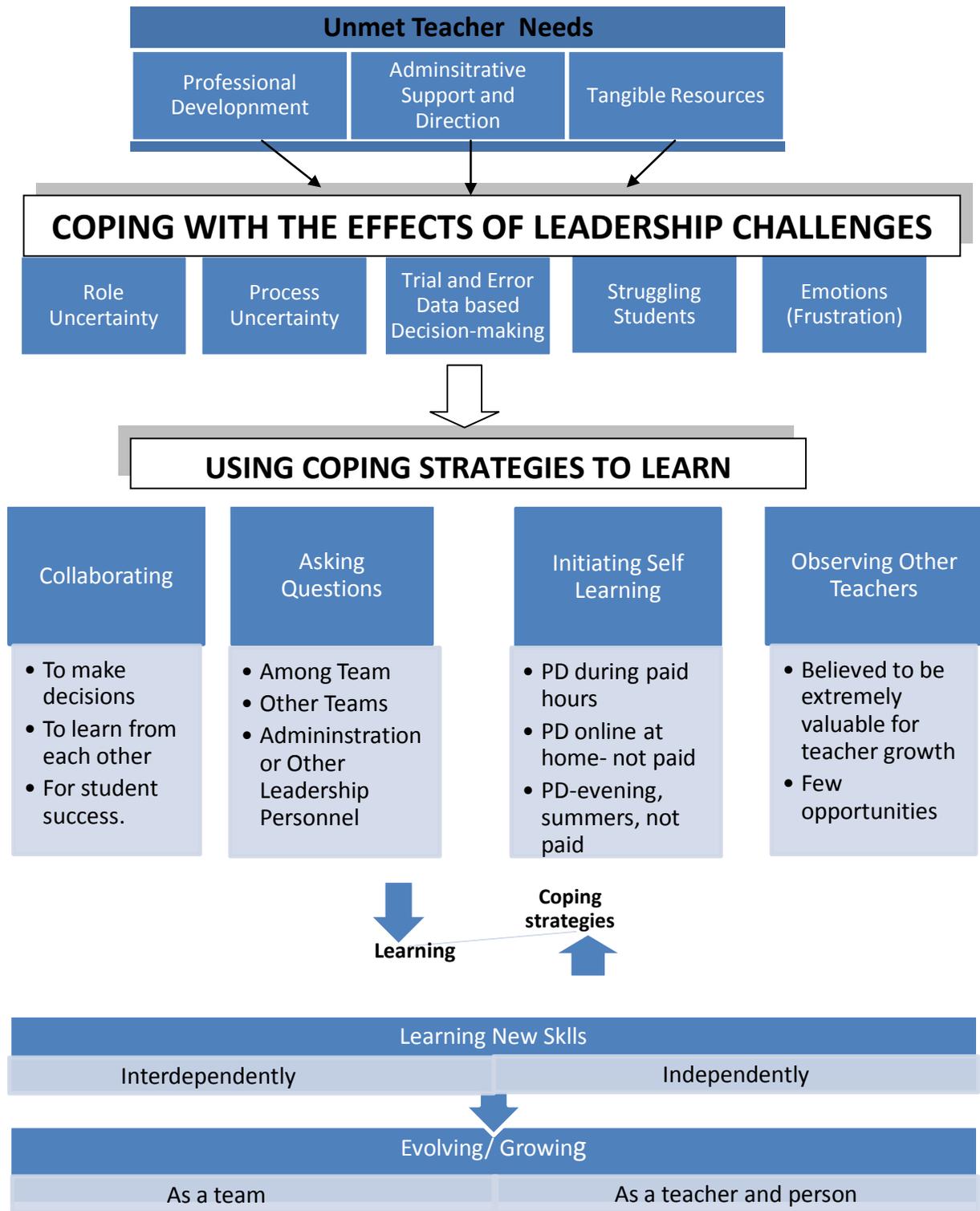


Figure 4-2. The process of RTI implementation

Coping With the Effects of Leadership Challenges at School and District Levels

Coping emerged as a major theme early in the data analysis. It remained the primary theme throughout the data analysis process. The coding initially revealed that the teacher participants experienced frustration and were trying to manage a variety of issues. The teachers expressed frustration and confusion because of their uncertainty about processes, roles and data based decision-making. The uncertainty stemmed from not knowing how to implement the RTI *process* in their grade level and in their school setting. The teachers described an uncertainty about their own roles and believed most staff members experienced the same. As I wrote in this memo, *"There is so much confusion and frustration about RTI processes and roles; it seems that effective school and district leadership could have resolved these issues long before this research took place."*

In both team meetings where I conducted observations of the team analyzing data, I observed that the participants were coping with uncertainty in their collaborative data analysis processes, a prerequisite skill necessary for data based decision-making. It troubled the teachers that some students continued to struggle because the interventions were not leading to learning gains. This lack of student progress might have actually stemmed from the teachers' inability to analyze data and make data based instructional decisions.

In addition to being frustrated with the issues noted above, the participants were coping with feelings of frustration and confusion because of their own unmet needs and the lack of professional development, tangible resources and direct support from leadership at the school. In response to a question about how the implementation of RTI affects teacher stress levels, Ms. Jones noted other effects of the stress.

Ms. Jones: It's definitely one more thing on your list, it adds to your frustration. It affects how you are, and it affects your teaching. It definitely has affected the teachers, so it affects everything else.

Early in the research, "not knowing" was a general theme related to the teachers' feelings of frustration and confusion. For example, the team claimed to know nothing about finding and using research based interventions required by the IDEA law of 2004 that endorsed RTI. Another example of the preliminary category of "not knowing" came out in the second focus group interview. Several teachers surprised me at this time by sharing that they did not even know how to initiate an RTI meeting outside of their team.

Ms. Jones: I also don't know how to take a child to an RTI meeting.

Ms. Davis: I don't know either.

Ms. Moore: I don't know either. I think we are supposed to email someone, but I am not even sure how to get the ball rolling.

These statements revealed that the participants were struggling with a most basic component of the RTI process. This dialogue also exemplifies the level of stress the teachers were experiencing. The teachers could have easily resolved the problem by reviewing emails or handouts from the beginning of the school year. At the time of their sharing this weakness, it seemed as if the teachers' goal was to convey the significance of their stress levels. Moreover, this dialogue indicates the level of trust and openness the participants displayed by the second focus group interview. Their disclosures revealed a sense of vulnerability and a high level of trust that validated my acceptance into their culture. I would not have confessed to an outside observer/researcher that I lacked such basic knowledge unless I had developed a high level of trust or unless I was feeling extremely stressed. As a caveat though, biases from my own personal experiences could influence this perception.

Eventually, the constant comparative method of data analysis led to replacing the category of "not knowing" with two different subcategories; coping with process uncertainty and coping with role uncertainty. The teachers expressed much more uncertainty about RTI processes than roles, as the number of coding entries for the former far exceeded the number for the latter. While the teachers seemed to have a solid understanding of RTI, they struggled with how to follow the RTI process within their school.

The process for RTI decision-making is challenging because there is not a linear decision making model to guide teachers' actions. When it appears the process is leading towards an evaluation, different criteria are required to qualify for the various programs that comprise special education. There were at least fourteen different programs serving students with special needs, such as specific learning disabled, language impaired, or other health impaired, and each requires explicit information and a unique data set to determine eligibility. Therefore, processes related to RTI as a replacement for the discrepancy model of special education qualification can be complex. However, basic school processes for RTI implementation as a prevention/intervention model still could have provided some structure the teachers desired.

The teacher team expressed uncertainty about roles several times during the focus group interviews. They felt shortchanged that the math coach had worked almost exclusively with the intermediate grades up to this point in the school year, despite implementing a new math curriculum across the school and district. The teachers believed this occurred because of the importance the Florida Comprehensive

Achievement Test (FCAT) scores have on the school grade. However, the problem left them frustrated and concerned about their students who were struggling in math.

In particular, the teachers were concerned about how to help students who experienced a significant number of absences catch up on math lessons. Fortunately, during this study, the math coach followed up on their request to service this team's students. In fact, during the first observation of a data analysis meeting teachers were selecting which students would receive interventions by the math coach.

The participants expressed that some people they formerly turned to for support were now referring them to someone else, claiming they weren't an "RTI expert." The search for specific support added to the participants' observations that role changes complicated RTI, and it heightened their frustration and confusion.

When I observed the team analyzing data to determine which students would receive math interventions, I observed great uncertainty. The frequency of questioning the participants engaged in exposed their uncertainties about data analysis and collaborative data based decision-making. I noted the team leader's absence might have caused extensive uncertainty and questioning during the first observation. Yet the same levels of uncertainty and questioning were evident in the next observation when the team leader was present. During the second observation, the team used student cards containing a variety of data to create heterogeneous student groups for next year's teachers. I left both meetings feeling perplexed as I tried to grasp the realities of their situation and understand the reason for such uncertainty with data based decision-making.

The challenges the teachers faced suggested weaknesses in leadership at both the school and district levels. It was evident the system did not support the teachers in their endeavors to implement RTI successfully because they lacked professional development, administrative support and direction, and tangible resources. As a result, they were faced with role and process uncertainty, using trial and error to make data based decisions, coping with feelings of frustration and confusion, and concerns about students who continued to struggle. This led to the conclusion that the core theme that best encompassed the teachers' experiences was, "coping with the effects of leadership challenges at the school and district level." Figure 4-3 depicts this major theme and the subcategories discussed above.



Figure 4-3. Coping with the effects of leadership challenges at school and district levels

Using Coping Strategies to Learn

For several weeks during the research, I believed that the frequency of questioning revealed a teacher deficiency. However, I had kept in mind a warning by many experts in qualitative research, which Charmaz (2010) stated most succinctly; "We also must guard against forcing our preconceptions onto the data we code" (p. 67). After ongoing reflection and data analysis, I noted that the teachers primarily used questioning when they were analyzing data collaboratively to make decisions about students. I finally recalled earlier statements made by the teachers that revealed no one on the team felt proficient in data analysis.

Repeated use of the constant comparative method (CCM) of data analysis led me to understand that the participants posed questions to cope with their uncertainties surrounding collaborative data based decision-making. I noted in a memo that the participants used questioning to learn interdependently in the team setting; *"I finally had an "ah-ha moment" about all the questioning-they are coping with their uncertainties by using questioning to learn from each other. I had been looking at questioning only as a deficiency all this time!"* Because of this realization, I concluded that the coping strategy of asking questions was equivalent with a learning strategy.

Through ongoing data analysis, collaboration emerged as another theme of coping strategies that led to teacher learning. There were three subcategories of collaboration: collaborating for student success, collaborating to make team decisions, and collaborating to learn. All three categories had similar frequencies of coding entries, which led me to conclude that no single purpose for collaborating was more important than another.

Two other themes of coping strategies that emerged in this study were initiating self-learning opportunities and observing other teachers. These two strategies were important to the teachers, but employed less frequently than collaboration and questioning. I noted that the first two coping strategies involved team interaction and the second two involved independent action. Additionally, I observed that the individual steps teachers took to learn frequently led to team learning through the collaborative processes the participants engaged in.

When the teachers spoke of the learning opportunities they could initiate on their own, they expressed a belief that professional development should occur during

contract hours unless there was compensation. Technology based professional development was prevalent in this district, which promoted online training for teachers' use, while relaxing in the comfort of their homes. However, the teachers did not have the motivation or energy to engage in online learning opportunities from their home after a long day of work.

The teachers continued their own learning in other ways. Three of the teachers were working on their master's degrees in curriculum and instruction, and one teacher took classes for gifted endorsement and attended the progress monitoring and data analysis training offered at the district. Ms. Jones also spoke about the importance of initiating professional development.

Ms. Jones: Like some things, I think you have to find it on your own in a way [short pause as she looks around the group] like I purposely went to that summer training on my own to get more information.

Despite a strong belief that observing other teachers provided extremely valuable learning opportunities, there were seldom occasions for them to employ this learning strategy. Three of the participants mentioned the value of prior opportunities to observe other teachers. One stated that she learned the most from her experience as an inclusion teacher, and a second teacher noted the value of participating in clinical rounds at another school. A third teacher reported learning about a strategy at a clinical education refresher course, to make use of substitute teachers during their "planning time" since they do not need this time to plan. During this time, the substitute could cover a class to free up a teacher who wanted to observe someone else teaching. The team stressed the importance of observing other teachers as a means of learning, and this had the potential to help them better cope with the challenges they faced.

These coping strategies explained how the teachers dealt with the effects of leadership challenges and how they continued to learn about teaching in the RTI framework. The coding for the data for each of the four coping strategies that led to teacher learning are in Appendix F. Figure 4-4 depicts these coping/learning strategies found in the research and discussed above.

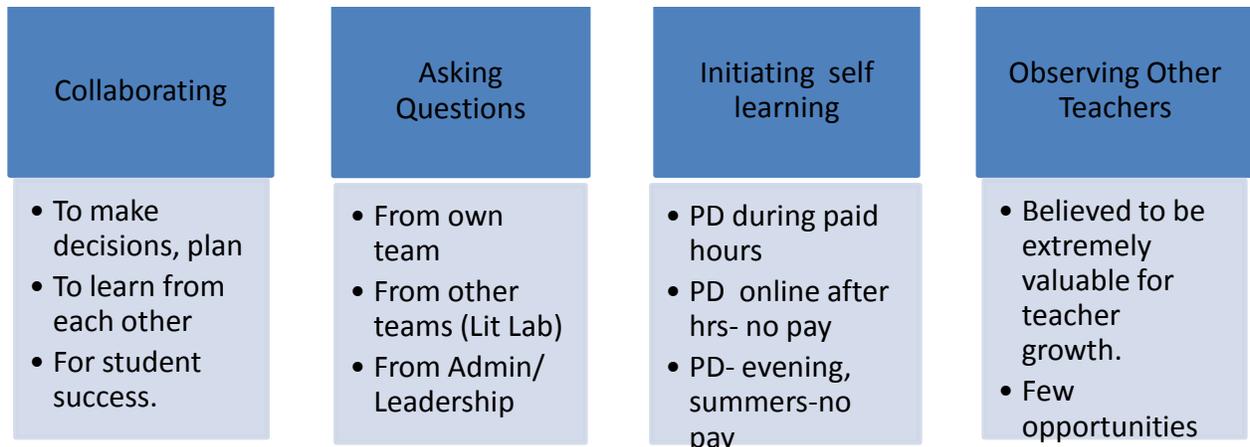


Figure 4-4. Coping strategies leading to teacher learning

Despite the fact that the teachers employed trial and error methods while implementing RTI, there was evidence that they were learning. They openly shared new knowledge gained independently with their team. Additionally, by the last focus group interview, the participants showed excitement about changes they planned to implement in their team the following year. Many of these changes were the result of things they had shared and discussed in the focus group interviews. For example, the team planned to use protocols to give direction and structure to their team meetings. They planned to share students across the grade level next year, an idea proposed by Ms. Brown in the first focus group meeting. The teachers also planned to enter Progress Monitoring Plans and formative assessment data into DW in the team setting rather than individually. They fully understood the value of collaborative learning because of

their own team experiences, having learned how to work together within the RTI framework.

The core theme, "coping with the effects of leadership challenges at the school and district level" best reflects the findings about the teachers' experiences. Applying the core theme to generate a theory for implementing RTI, the grounded theory that best described the teacher experiences in this study was "teachers cope with the effects of leadership challenges in implementing change."

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of a first grade teacher team implementing response to intervention (RTI) in order to elucidate practical, authentic recommendations for school leaders that would inform future practices for school, district, or statewide RTI implementation and sustainability. The discussion is presented in the following subsections: (1) summary of the findings, (2) connections with prior research, (3) practical implications of the findings, (4) suggestions for further research and (5) conclusion.

Summary of Findings

The research revealed that the teachers were coping with the effects of leadership challenges at the school and district levels. The teachers lacked professional development, direct support and follow up from school leaders, and tangible resources. As a result, they coped with feelings of frustration and confusion, and uncertainty about processes, roles, and collaborative data based decision-making. They were also frustrated with the ongoing learning problems of some students receiving interventions.

To cope with these challenges, the teachers used collaboration and questioning to learn interdependently in the team setting. They also coped and learned independently by initiating professional development and observing other teachers. This independent learning frequently led to interdependent learning among the team. As the teachers learned by employing the four coping strategies, (collaboration, questioning, initiating self-learning and observing other teachers), they engaged in a cycle, returning to use the strategies to develop better understanding of constructed knowledge. The combination of all learning ultimately led to individual and team growth.

There were two unexpected findings in the research. Early in the research, the teachers reported that RTI had a positive effect on teacher motivation, a disparity from the challenges and frustrations they experienced implementing it. This may have stemmed from the other unanticipated finding, that neither the teachers nor the principal reported buy in was a problem at their school. The teachers had bought into the vision and approach the principal presented to his faculty, that RTI provides the framework for what great teachers have tried to do for many generations.

Several research findings highlighted new tasks or practices the teachers needed for RTI implementation. The participants were already familiar with many practices needed for RTI, such as differentiation. However, they noted that their ability to differentiate instruction improved because of data analysis in the RTI framework. Many of the new teacher practices identified the study (listed below) pertained to data analysis.

1. Analyze data to differentiate and scaffold core instruction in order to accelerate the learning of all students.
2. Analyze data to determine how to share students across the grade level.
3. Analyze data to determine how to group students for Tier 2 interventions and identify which students would receive Tier 3 interventions.
4. Regroup students receiving interventions outside the classroom to make room for migrant students who arrive later in the school year.
5. Develop effective PMPs, aligning the formative assessment used to monitor progress with the identified problem and intervention implemented.
6. Use DW to record progress monitoring data and generate graphs comparing data with other students receiving the same intervention.
7. Implement interventions *with fidelity*.

8. Implement time management strategies, including the use of protocols or agendas for team meetings.
9. Distribute roles among the team, such as timekeeper, taskmaster, and record keeper to identify items needing follow up and document decisions reached by the team.

The research uncovered other practices that would have assisted the teachers. Grade level sets of data, as opposed to classroom sets of data, would have eased analysis and decision making when the teachers were creating intervention groups. The teachers would have also benefitted from asking their school leaders for clarification of criteria or processes to use before meeting to make team decisions about students. Simple guidelines showing what data to use to make different types of decisions also would have assisted the teachers in their endeavors.

The teachers wanted to take ownership of intervention selection for students in tier 2 or 3 by learning about the interventions available in their school. In PS/RTI, it is important to select interventions aimed at resolving the specific learning problem. Since learning gains are the typical response when interventions accurately address the learning problem, training in intervention selection could have alleviated some of the teachers' frustrations surrounding students who were not responding to interventions. Site based staff development by the literacy team would have given teachers the tools they needed for intervention selection.

The teachers were also conscientious about implementing interventions with fidelity. Howell et al. (2008) noted the importance of administration monitoring the fidelity of interventions, yet the teachers felt accountable without even knowing this. The participants were concerned specifically that their time constraints would affect the fidelity of intervention implementation. In addition, the teachers frequently expressed

that a lack of time to perform all their teaching duties was one of their greatest challenges. Previous studies have also shown that time is one of the major problems teachers face as they implement RTI (Carney et al., 2008; Mahdavi et al., 2009).

Earlier research on RTI validated the teachers' concerns about selecting appropriate research-based interventions and fidelity of intervention implementation. Howell et al. (2008) noted that the success of RTI was dependent on active coaching and progress monitoring of the implementation process by administrators. Torgeson (2009) cautioned that if schools experiment with early interventions that are not powerful enough, the RTI instructional model could actually delay the provision of special education services.

Teachers in this study took more time than necessary to make data based decisions collaboratively because they used trial and error to analyze data. Collaborative data analysis leading to expert decision-making by a team requires a different skill set than individual decision making for one's own class. The team might have made better decisions, without having to make changes later, if they had participated in procedural training for data based decision-making. However, without further training, it was evident the team would have difficulty using data to plan how to share students across the grade level next year as they intended.

There were several key findings for how school and district leaders can best support teachers in the implementation of RTI. This study confirmed earlier findings, that initial and ongoing professional development is critical (Burns et al., 2005; Howell et al., 2008; Buffum et al., 2009). Planning for professional development did not include assessing what teachers already knew and what they needed to know to implement

RTI. The principal of the research site acknowledged the initial district RTI training was beneficial, but ongoing professional development across the district fell short of meeting teacher needs. Additionally, the teachers wanted more training opportunities during contracted hours, and compensation for evening or summer trainings mandated by the district.

Direct support from leadership was the primary need expressed by the teachers in this study. The findings revealed that the teachers wanted four different kinds of direct support from their school leaders. First, they wanted more instructional staff to provide interventions. Large numbers of students at risk led to more students needing interventions, and an additional teacher to provide interventions would have better served the students. The teachers also wanted specific directions or processes in place for implementing PS/RTI. This was challenging for the principal since he noted there was inconsistent information coming from the district office at the time of the research.

The teachers stated a need for increased administrative presence in their classrooms. They also wanted follow up from school leaders in the form of questioning them about specific students with learning or behavioral problems. This could have led to important dialogue between teachers and leaders that the teachers needed to increase their capacity. The teachers believed they were more accountable for student learning gains in the RTI framework and they wanted administration to help them be accountable. Some of the teachers in the study actually perceived that they were carrying the burden of accountability on their own shoulders, even though increasingly principals are being held accountable for student learning gains.

The participants expressed a need for tangible resources to guide them with RTI implementation. The principal had created a flowchart at the beginning of the year, and the district developed one mid-year. One of the flowcharts did not cover the gray areas of RTI, and the other was deemed too complicated, so the teachers did not use either. There were other resources that would have assisted the teachers, such as a list of interventions available at the school and the district offices, but that was not available.

In summary, the findings revealed the school leaders needed to support teachers in PS/RTI implementation by providing ongoing professional development during contract hours, tangible resources such as flowcharts and lists of intervention tools, and direct support focused on accountability for student learning. Specifically, the teachers wanted additional instructional staff to provide interventions, specific directions or processes in place, and increased presence in the classroom followed by dialogue about struggling students.

The costs were high for teachers because ineffective planning and a lack of proactive leadership did not lay a foundation of consistency and structure that was needed for implementing RTI. Fortunately, district leaders responded to pleas from teachers and administrators that they needed increased consistency across the district. During the time of this study, the district mandated that the special education department become responsible for RTI. They created a new position, an Intervention Support Specialist (ISS) to improve communication between the district and schools in the third year of implementing RTI. It was believed the person in this position would provide the increased support that school staff needed for RTI. The ISS was also designated to be a link between regular education and special education, ensuring the

fidelity of RTI implementation while monitoring the compliance of special education laws in each school. The steps the district was planning for the third year of RTI implementation demonstrated the need for leadership to respond to needs that arise during implementation and provided hope for the teachers that things would improve.

Buffum et al. (2009) noted, "Once a school makes student learning its fundamental mission, it manifests a sense of professional and moral urgency to do whatever it takes to ensure that all students succeed" (p. 62). In this study, a lack of professional and moral urgency (leadership) from school and district administration not only affected the teachers, it also affected the students.

Connections with Prior Research

A majority of previous research examined the efficacy (outcomes) of RTI, as opposed to this study that investigated teachers' experiences of implementing RTI. Dexter et al. (2008) called for research to examine the necessary components for developing and sustaining an RTI program. By exploring the authentic experiences of a teacher team as they implemented RTI, the findings revealed detailed information about three necessary components: professional development, direct support and tangible resources. The research also identified new teacher practices necessitated by RTI.

The findings concurred with prior research that PLC's provide a solid foundation for RTI implementation (Buffum et al., 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). In this study, PLCs were already in place because the district had promoted them five years earlier. The inception of PLCs in elementary schools had already led to common planning time for teachers in each grade level.

The teachers on this team noted that everyone on the team participated and contributed as equal partners. Each teacher posted lesson plans for one subject area

that served as a basic framework for all teachers on the team. They collaborated to create common homework and assessments across the grade level, to improve instruction and teaching strategies, and to make team decisions. There was congruence between what the teachers verbalized about the strengths of their team and what I observed during my focus group interviews. Yet no one on the team emerged as a leader engaging in distributed leadership across the school. While the teacher team had become a learning community, it appeared that a school wide learning community had not yet evolved.

Effective communication and collaborative skills are necessary for authentic PLC's (Buffum et al., 2009), and it was evident the teachers in this study had these skills. The teachers had created trusting relationships that allowed both individuals and the learning community to develop and evolve. In fact, the participants who had been on the team the longest were surprised to hear how the two newest team members felt valued, listened to, and that they were important members of the team. One participant even reported that she declined the principal's request to change grade levels the following year because of her positive experiences with this team.

Prior research has shown that distributed leadership is necessary for successful RTI implementation (Buffum et al., 2009; Howell et al., 2008). In this study, leadership was not distributed across the school, as evidenced by teachers having to continuously search for answers. The teachers struggled and learned by trial and error without knowledge that was critical for the success of RTI. Consequently, many students' learning problems were not resolved by the interventions they received.

Phillips (2004) observed a paradigm shift as teachers engaged in professional development every day among "teams of teachers who share responsibility for high levels of learning for all students" (p. 242). I observed that teachers took responsibility for student learning as they engaged in collaborative practices consistent with Phillips' description of everyday professional development. The learning community became the primary support for teachers as they grew and developed through their collaborative efforts. However, informal learning through collaboration with the team was not enough for successful RTI implementation because the teachers lacked leadership support and a fundamental knowledge of interventions, data analysis, and data based decision-making.

The findings also resonated with Knotek's (2003) ethnographic research examining the efficacy of the social process. The social milieu of the teams he studied fostered objectivity and rigor, yet, "sometimes the social process made the team more reflexive and less reflective" (Knotek, 2003, p. 11). The teachers in this research admitted at times they lost focus of the objectives of team meetings, and they expressed a desire to become more efficient with the use of their limited time together.

I found only one other qualitative study that concluded teachers need training in data analysis and data based decision-making in the RTI framework. Jacobs (2008) noted, "Ongoing professional development is necessary so that teachers and aides are sufficiently trained in using instructional techniques and also feel confident about collecting and analyzing data important to the decision-making aspects of RTI" (p. 169). Since earlier RTI studies primarily used psychologists with extensive training in data analysis to experiment with the RTI process, the need for teacher training in data

analysis and decision-making may have gone unnoticed. Given the reality of implementing RTI in schools across this district, teacher teams were responsible for intervention selection, progress monitoring, and data based decision-making, rather than school psychologists. Historically, teachers have received little or no training in any of these areas in their pre-service education.

Finally, the core theme that emerged from the findings, "coping with the effects of leadership challenges at the school and district levels" suggests the importance of systems theory in the RTI framework. Howell et al. (2008) noted that RTI entails educational redesign at all levels, and he went on to state, "RTI requires state of the art instruction, leadership, and risk taking to ensure that the initiative takes hold, demonstrates success, and is sustained" (p.114). The findings in this study revealed that ineffective planning and inconsistent district leadership created system wide challenges for school employees, who resorted to learning by trial and error within their own schools or teams. Without leadership at the school and district levels collaborating to plan effectively for RTI implementation and sustainability, the entire system suffered.

Practical Implications of the Findings

Ardoin et al. (2005) noted that few studies have operationalized the process to provide practitioners with support when incorporating RTI within normal school hours. Therefore, one aim of this qualitative study was to elucidate practical, authentic recommendations for school leaders that would inform future practices for RTI implementation and sustainability.

As noted earlier, the findings support the importance of having PLCs in place before implementing RTI. In this study, the teacher team created a safe learning community where they openly expressed thoughts, feelings, confusion, and questions.

Their PLC provided the opportunity for collaborative learning as teachers coped with frustration and confusion, uncertainty, and students who continued to struggle. Thus, the first implication of the findings is that schools or districts must have laid the foundation for RTI by having high functioning learning communities in place to help teachers cope with the systemic change of RTI implementation.

There are several other practical implications of the findings that relate specifically to district and school leadership's role in RTI implementation. Many of practical implications relate to professional development.

1. RTI requires long-term school and district planning and resources to provide initial and ongoing professional development related to RTI implementation.
2. Staff developers and trainers need to consider the best strategies and methodologies for teaching the *procedural* knowledge required for RTI.
3. Teachers need social, contextual and situational learning opportunities to reach a level of proficiency in collaborative data based decision-making *before* implementing RTI.
4. Professional development needs to be consistent across the district and occur during teacher contract hours unless compensation is provided for evening or summer trainings.
5. Teachers need increased levels of support from administration when implementing RTI, including more presence in the classroom and follow up on the progress of specific students.
6. Teachers experienced an overwhelming sense of accountability with the implementation of RTI, and they need to know that their leaders share in the "burden of accountability."
7. Teachers want structure in their schools during times of change, and school administrators needed consistency from the district leaders to create a structural foundation for change.
8. Consistency in top leadership and consistency between district departments are crucial for effective RTI implementation and sustainability. Districts should consider making anticipated changes in top leadership occur *prior* to implementing RTI.

One of the most important implications of the findings is that effective school and district leaders are necessary for RTI implementation across a district. The principal implementing RTI needs to model an urgent pursuit of professional knowledge that will lead to student success, and relate with staff in ways that best support them. School leaders also need to increase the leadership capacity of key individuals to increase school wide learning and shared leadership. Additionally, school leaders need to monitor the fidelity of RTI implementation by having a frequent presence in classrooms during core instruction and intervention time. Returning once again to the analogy of implementing RTI with a plane that is being built as it flies, the plane will not leave the ground and remain airborne without effective leaders piloting the plane.

Suggestions for Future Research

As a framework requiring systemic change, RTI requires extensive professional development, effective leadership, and ongoing administrative support at school and district levels. Future research could compare how different districts offered PD to support RTI implementation. Some districts may have phased in staff development learning opportunities over an extended period rather than investing in extensive PD before implementation.

Survey research could explore if there are any non-financial incentives that would motivate teachers to participate in staff development opportunities in the evenings, on weekends, or during the summer. Quantitative research could identify whether different trainings were necessary for teachers working in different types of schools, such as Title 1 and non Title 1 public schools, charter schools and private schools.

Another study could explore if the kinds of support teachers in this study needed was prevalent in other schools or districts. Mixed methods research could explore the

effects of various kinds of support teachers received as they implemented RTI. For example, what kind of support might help teachers retain confidence in their teaching ability despite uncertainties with roles and processes during the early years of RTI? Are there any kinds of support that teachers reacted negatively to in RTI implementation, such as having strict procedures to follow before discussing a child at a school RTI meeting? Finding answers to these, or similar questions will lead to school leaders who are better equipped to support teachers in RTI implementation.

Research could explore different relationships between PLCs and RTI implementation. For example, are there components of RTI that might lead to building a stronger school wide learning community, where collaboration is prevalent not only within teacher teams but across the organization? Is there relationship between a weak PLC during RTI implementation and a teacher's decision to leave the profession?

Other suggestions for future research stemmed from the finding that RTI made the participants in this study want to be better teachers. A quantitative analysis could examine the impact of RTI on teachers based on their years of service. For example, a comparative analysis could determine if the number of years teaching affected teachers' motivation for continuous learning in the RTI framework. Similar research could also explore if the implementation of RTI had any effect on the stages of teacher development found in earlier research. Another study could explore whether the implementation of RTI leads to a greater number of teachers leaving the profession before five years or a greater number of veteran teachers retiring early to pursue other careers.

Future research should also distinguish the leadership elements that are necessary at school and district levels for successful RTI implementation. Howell et al. (2008) stated the most critical element to RTI success is instructional leadership from the principal, superintendent, and administrative staff. Therefore, more research is needed to reveal specifically how leadership can best support RTI implementation and sustainability.

Finally, the most practical research to follow this study would be to test the grounded theory that "teachers cope with leadership challenges at the school and district level when implementing change initiatives." If the grounded theory proved applicable to other grade levels and school settings, a comparative study could then test the applicability of the theory to other types of organizations.

Conclusion

Many of the findings in this study validated earlier research conclusions (Hollenbeck, 2007; Phillips, 2004; Stecker, 2007), such as the needs for PLCs to lay a foundation for RTI, the need for extensive and ongoing professional development, and leadership support to implement and sustain RTI. Yet, other findings in this research raised new questions deserving of future research so that school and district leaders can better operationalize RTI implementation.

The findings showed that a lack leadership from district and school administrators hindered the process of RTI implementation. Leadership challenges at the district level led to a lack of consistency and structure that school staff needed to implement RTI. A lack of fluidity in top district leadership, particularly the superintendent's exit that coincided with the research, likely affected RTI implementation across the district. However, without quantitative research measures, the real impact of this variable on the

research findings will remain unknown. Regardless of the reasons, the outcome for this district in terms of student learning was that it moved from an "A" grade to a "B" grade in the state of Florida's ranking system this school year.

The grounded theory developed in this study was that teachers cope with the effects of leadership challenges at the school and district level when implementing change initiatives. This theory acknowledges that leadership actions have consequences felt throughout the district. Problems in district leadership created a domino effect whereby principals, teachers, and students were all affected. Lacking leadership support, the teachers in this study became frustrated and confused, sometimes leading to a sense of failure in their role as educators. Teachers cannot create shared knowledge that will lead to improved teacher practices and instruction without strong support from leadership.

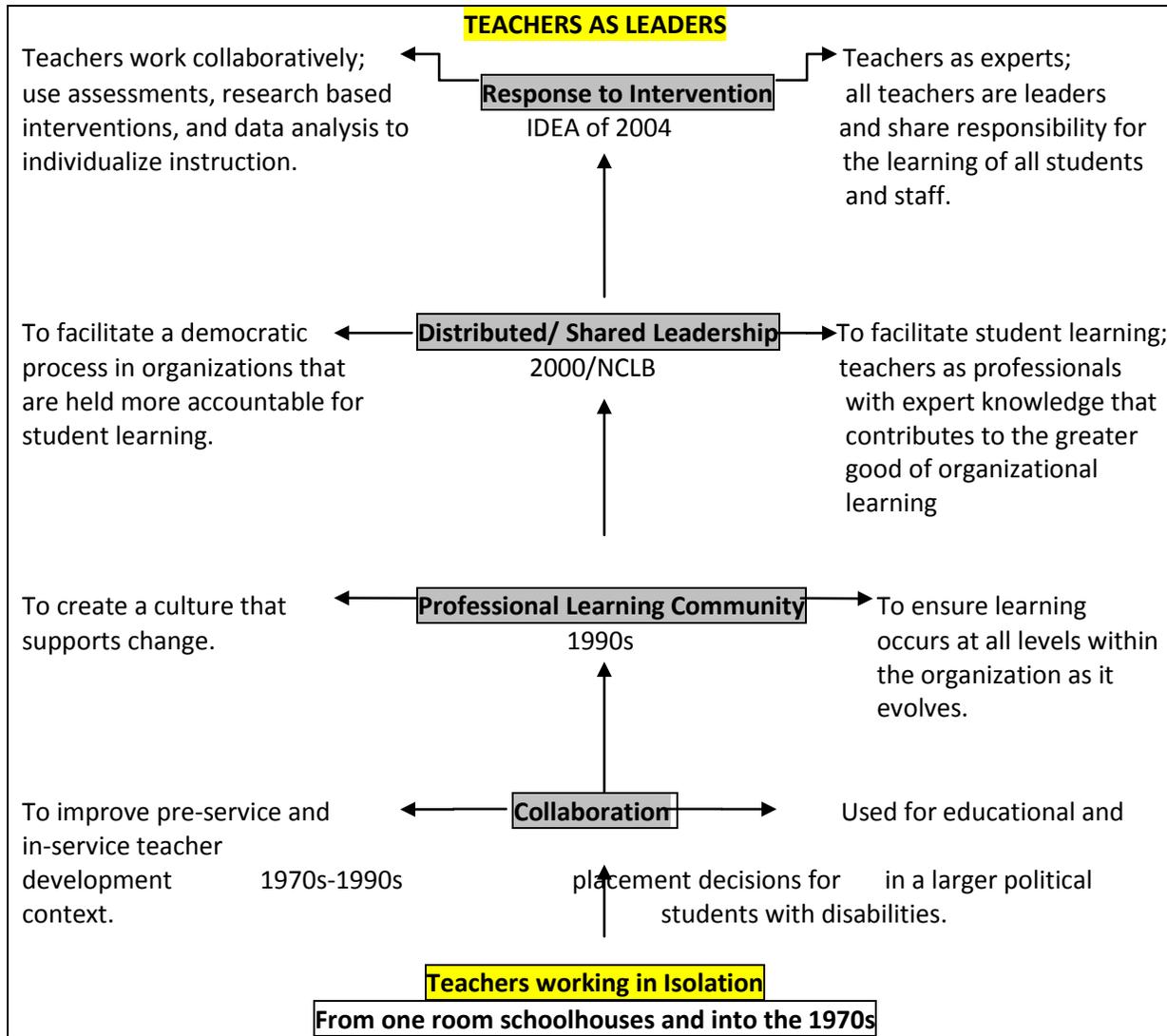
Many of the practical recommendations for school and district leaders implementing RTI related to professional development (PD). Long term district planning for PD is essential for RTI implementation, and to be effectively planned it must include assessments of teacher knowledge. Planning should also explore ways to schedule trainings to maximize teacher attendance.

Without this fundamental knowledge of research-based interventions, data analysis, and data based decision-making, RTI implementation fell short of meeting the needs of the teachers and the students. School leaders must be responsive to teachers' needs for support and professional development and take steps to increase teacher capacity and build leadership capacity in their teachers so distributed or shared leadership supports schoolwide RTI implementation. Shared leadership will also be

important for sustaining RTI as new teachers enter the system and work amidst teachers with extensive RTI experience.

The findings contributed to the knowledge base of RTI from a teacher team's perspective and revealed the kinds of support teachers needed at this site during RTI implementation. The in depth findings regarding the teachers' experiences in this study are intended to guide school and district leaders in supporting the "front line service providers" who share accountability for the learning of all students. The conclusions of this research confirmed earlier findings that stressed the importance of administrative support and leadership when implementing RTI (Hollenbeck, 2007; Howell et al., 2008, Lau et al., 2006; Mahdavi et al., 2009; Santangelo, 2009). Despite frustrations and challenges with implementation, RTI it still holds much promise as a means of prevention and early intervention to improve the learning of all students.

APPENDIX A
AN EVOLUTION: FROM ISOLATION TO TEACHER LEADERS IN RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION



APPENDIX B INFORMED CONSENTS

Informed Consent for Teachers Participating in the Study

Protocol Title: A Teacher Team's Perceptions of Implementing School Wide Response to Intervention, a Systematic Approach to Improving the Learning of All Students

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of this study is to develop a theory of the Problem Solving Response to Intervention (RTI) approach. RTI, which was mandated by the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), is a systematic, school wide, collaborative process in which data based decision-making is used to design instruction and individualized interventions for all students. In the RTI process, all school resources are integrated to provide early interventions and accelerate the learning of students functioning below grade level, whether or not they have been identified as having a learning disability.

Answers to the following questions were sought in this research study:

1. How does RTI affect teacher learning?
2. What new tasks and practices are required of teachers with RTI implementation?
3. How can school and district leaders best support teachers in the implementation of the RTI problem solving approach?

What you will be asked to do in the study: You will be asked to share your demographics as a teacher, including how many years of teaching experience, how long you have worked with this team and/ or this grade level, your highest degree earned, and the extent of your training for RTI. You will be asked to participate in and be audiotape recorded as a team, in three focus group interviews, one in each month of April, May and June. You will be asked to be observed and audio recorded in two RTI problem solving team meetings following the first and second focus group meetings respectively. The questions will pertain to your team's perceptions of the implementation of the RTI process in your school and district. You will be asked to review information gathered and conclusions drawn from qualitative methods in order to affirm that the findings from the study are accurate from your perspective.

Time required: A maximum of 4 hours of focus group meetings to be held at your convenience, and two hours of observations while performing your job as a problem solving team. One additional hour will be needed in August or September of 2011 for reviewing the conclusions drawn from the study and affirming the accuracy of the findings from your perspective.

Risks and Benefits: Your participation will contribute to the knowledge base of how schools and districts should approach full-scale RTI implementation, the teachers' changing role within systemic change, and how instructional leaders can support teachers during reform efforts such as RTI. There are no known risks for participating in this research.

Compensation: There is no compensation for participating in this research.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your name will not be reported to any personnel of the [redacted] Schools or the University of Florida, and your name will not be used in any report. Your school name will also be changed to protect your identity in any reports. All recordings will be maintained in a locked file cabinet in the home office of the primary researcher (Michele Meyer) and will be erased and destroyed within one year of completion of the written dissertation.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

Michele M. Meyer EdS [redacted] School Counselor, [redacted]
Phone 239-671-3405.

Dr. Linda Behar-Horenstein, College of Education, 1212 Norman Hall, Gainesville, FL, 32611
Phone 352-273-4330

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:

IRB02 Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone 352-392-0433.

Agreement: I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: _____ Date: _____

Principal Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Informed Consent for School Leadership Participating in the Study

Protocol Title: A Teacher Team's Perceptions of Implementing School Wide Response to Intervention, a Systematic Approach to Improving the Learning of All Students

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of this study is to develop a theory of the Problem Solving Response to Intervention (RTI) approach. RTI, which was mandated by the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), is a systematic, school wide, collaborative process in which data based decision-making is used to design instruction and individualized interventions for all students. In the RTI process, all school resources are integrated to provide early interventions and accelerate the learning of students functioning below grade level, whether or not they have been identified as having a learning disability.

Answers to the following questions were sought in this research study:

1. How does RTI affect teacher learning?
2. What new tasks and practices are required of teachers with RTI implementation?
3. How can school and district leaders best support teachers in the implementation of the RTI problem solving process?

What you will be asked to do in the study: You will be asked to share your experiences of implementing RTI school wide in an individual interview that is recorded. You will be asked to share artifacts pertaining to RTI implementation, processes, and professional development.

Time required: A maximum of 1 hour for an interview to be held at your convenience, and two hours of review of the findings to access the accuracy from your perspective.

Risks and Benefits: Your participation will contribute to the knowledge base of how schools and districts should approach full-scale RTI implementation, the teachers' changing role within systemic change, and how instructional leaders can support teachers during reform efforts such as RTI. There are no known risks for participating in this research.

Compensation: There is no compensation for participating in this research.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your name will not be reported to any personnel of the [redacted] Schools or the University of Florida, and your name will not be used in any report. Your school name will also be changed to protect your identity in any reports. All recordings will be maintained in a locked file cabinet in the home office of the primary researcher (Michele Meyer) and will be erased and destroyed within one year of completion of the written dissertation.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

Michele M. Meyer EdS, [redacted] School Counselor, [redacted];
Phone 239-671-3405.

Dr. Linda Behar-Horenstein, College of Education, 1212 Norman Hall, Gainesville, FL, 32611
Phone 352-273-4330

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:

IRB02 Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone 352-392-0433.

Agreement: I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: _____ Date: _____

Principal Investigator: _____ Date: _____

Informed Consent for Teachers Participating in the Focus Group Pilot Study

Protocol Title: A Teacher Team's Perceptions of Implementing School Wide Response to Intervention, a Systematic Approach to Improving the Learning of All Students

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of this pilot study is to inform the researcher of the quality of the first set of questions to be used in the official focus group interviews with teachers at another school, thus providing the researcher with an opportunity to improve on the questions. The purpose of the research study is to develop a theory of the Problem Solving Response to Intervention (RTI) approach. RT, which was mandated by the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), is a systematic, school wide, collaborative process in which data based decision-making is used to design instruction and individualized interventions for all students. In the RTI process, all school resources are integrated to provide early interventions and accelerate the learning of students functioning below grade level, whether or not they have been identified as having a learning disability.

Answers to the following questions were sought in this research study:

1. How does RTI affect teacher learning?
2. What new tasks and practices are required of teachers with RTI implementation?
3. How can school and district leaders best support teachers in the implementation of the RTI problem solving approach?

What you will be asked to do in the study: You will be asked to participate in and be audiotape recorded in one focus group interview. You will be asked to solicit your advice on the quality of questions asked and to suggest if different questions might be more beneficial to the research.

Time required: A minimum of 1 hour of a focus group interview to be held at your convenience after school. A maximum of 30 minutes to share your reflections, thoughts and ideas about the questions used.

Risks and Benefits: Your participation will contribute to the overall quality of the research study, which is being conducted to increase the knowledge base of how schools and districts should approach full-scale RTI implementation, the teachers' changing role within systemic change, and how instructional leaders can support teachers during reform efforts such as RTI. There are no known risks for participating in this research.

Compensation: There is no compensation for participating in this research.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. Your name will not be reported to any personnel of the [redacted] Schools or the University of Florida, and your name will not be used in any report. Your school name will also be changed to protect your identity in any reports. All recordings will be maintained in a locked

file cabinet in the home office of the primary researcher (Michele Meyer) and will be erased and destroyed within one year of completion of the written dissertation.

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating.

Right to withdraw from the study: You have the right to withdraw from the study at anytime without consequence.

Whom to contact if you have questions about the study:

Michele M. Meyer EdS, [redacted] School Counselor, [redacted];
Phone 239-671-3405.

Dr. Linda Behar-Horenstein, College of Education, 1212 Norman Hall, Gainesville, FL, 32611
Phone 352-273-4330

Whom to contact about your rights as a research participant in the study:

IRB02 Office, Box 112250, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-2250; phone 352-392-0433.

Agreement: I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant: _____ Date: _____

Principal Investigator: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX C
TEACHER DEMOGRAPHICS QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: _____ Male or Female (Circle one)

Total number of years teaching? _____ Number of years in CCPS. _____

Number of years at this school? _____

Number of years in this grade? _____

Other grade levels you have taught: _____

Degrees held:

Are you currently pursuing another degree, and if so what is it?

Certifications held:

ESOL (ELL) Endorsed? Yes or No (please circle one)

Please describe any RTI professional development you have had in the last two years, that was provided by the school or the district:

Please describe any RTI professional development you have had outside of this school district:

APPENDIX D INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions for First Focus Group Interview of RTI Team

1. Describe the RTI process in your school.
2. How has your teaching changed since the implementation of RTI? Describe specific skills you have learned or improved, and how those skills have impacted your teaching
3. How have the learning experiences that you provide students changed since the implementation of RTI?
4. What tasks does your team need to accomplish collaboratively in RTI?
5. What resources, if any, have accompanied the implementation of RTI? How have they impacted your teaching or the activities/ learning experiences that you provide for students?
6. How does school leadership and other school staff support you in the RTI problem solving process and in providing interventions for students in need?

Questions for Second Focus Group Interview of RTI Team

Note: Proposed questions may change because of information drawn from the first focus group and the first problem solving meeting observation.

1. Can you describe any school structures or processes that support your RTI team?
2. In terms of being a professional learning community, can you identify how your team has developed over time and since the implementation of RTI last year?

3. Can you describe any struggles or frustrations you have had in learning and implementing RTI?

4. Describe the ways that district personnel support your team with the RTI process or interventions related to RTI.

5. Describe a situation(s) when the team sought the help of school or district personnel to solve a problem.

6. Describe any professional development you have had this year regarding RTI that has made a positive impact on your ability to help students learn.

Questions for Third Focus Group Interview of RTI Team

Note: These proposed questions may change because of information drawn from the first focus group and the first problem solving meeting observation.

1. Describe how the RTI process has improved at your school since last year.

2. Does a team leader need new or different skills in order to lead the team since RTI has been implemented? If so, please describe the skills needed.

3. Can you describe how your team could become more effective as a problem solving team?

4. What kind of support do you envision your team might need to overcome any limitations and increase your effectiveness as collaborating teachers?

5. Describe how the leadership is distributed amongst your team, and describe any specific roles each of you have as a team member.

6. Can you identify and describe any school structures, processes, or aspects of culture that support or hinder the effectiveness of the team?

7. What changes do you believe are still needed in your team, school, and district in order for RTI to be sustained?

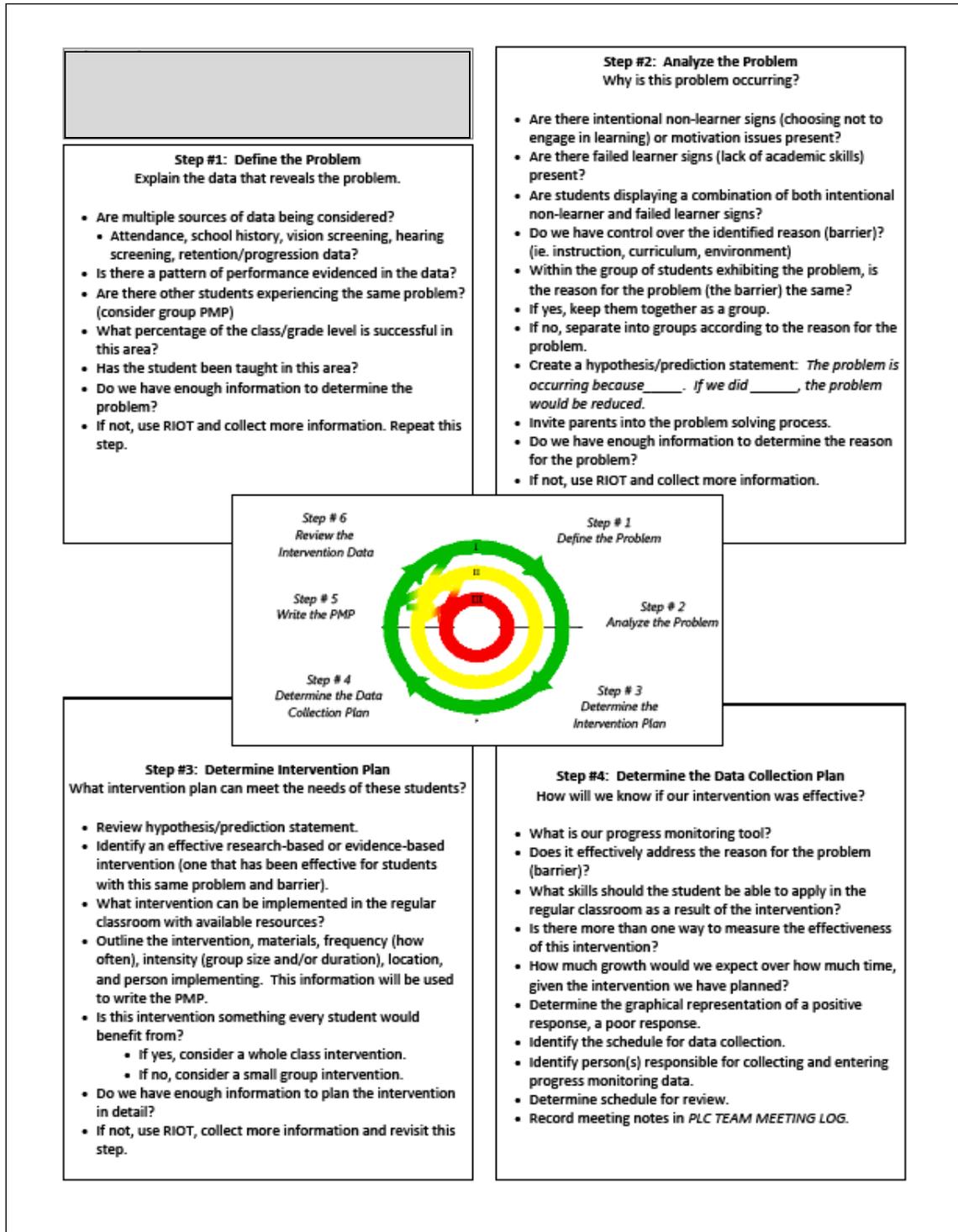
Questions for Individual Interview with Principal or Designee

1. What do you believe teachers' greatest struggles have been with the implementation of RTI?
2. Describe what professional development you have offered teachers at your school to facilitate teacher learning of RTI.
3. In what other ways do you support teachers in the implementation of RTI?
4. If you monitor the fidelity of intervention implementation, how is it accomplished, and by whom?
5. Describe your role as a change agent with the implementation of RTI at your school.
6. Describe your greatest accomplishment in the implementation of RTI.
7. What has been your greatest hurdle or frustration while implementing RTI?
8. How do you believe you have grown as a school leader since the implementation of RTI?
9. What still needs to happen at your school for the successful implementation of RTI, and how do you envision it will happen?
10. What support will you as a school leader need from the district for RTI to be sustained over time?

Please provide me with documentation/ artifacts that describe the RTI process, teacher expectations, such as non-negotiables, and professional development provided to teachers.

APPENDIX E ARTIFACTS

Artifact 1: Response to Intervention Problem Solving Discussion Guide



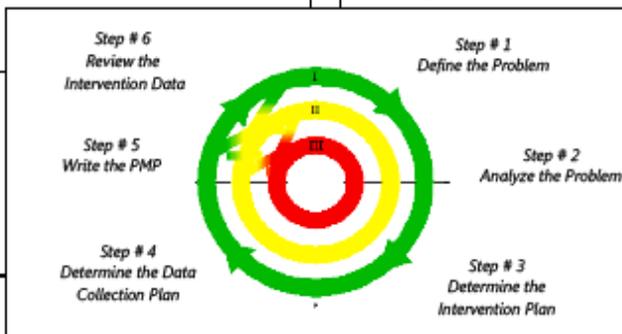


Step #1: Define the Problem
 Explain the data that reveals the problem.

- Are multiple sources of data being considered?
 - Attendance, school history, vision screening, hearing screening, retention/progression data?
- Is there a pattern of performance evidenced in the data?
- Are there other students experiencing the same problem? (consider group PMP)
- What percentage of the class/grade level is successful in this area?
- Has the student been taught in this area?
- Do we have enough information to determine the problem?
- If not, use RIOT and collect more information. Repeat this step.

Step #2: Analyze the Problem
 Why is this problem occurring?

- Are there intentional non-learner signs (choosing not to engage in learning) or motivation issues present?
- Are there failed learner signs (lack of academic skills) present?
- Are students displaying a combination of both intentional non-learner and failed learner signs?
- Do we have control over the identified reason (barrier)? (ie. instruction, curriculum, environment)
- Within the group of students exhibiting the problem, is the reason for the problem (the barrier) the same?
- If yes, keep them together as a group.
- If no, separate into groups according to the reason for the problem.
- Create a hypothesis/prediction statement: *The problem is occurring because _____. If we did _____, the problem would be reduced.*
- Invite parents into the problem solving process.
- Do we have enough information to determine the reason for the problem?
- If not, use RIOT and collect more information.



Step #3: Determine Intervention Plan
 What intervention plan can meet the needs of these students?

- Review hypothesis/prediction statement.
- Identify an effective research-based or evidence-based intervention (one that has been effective for students with this same problem and barrier).
- What intervention can be implemented in the regular classroom with available resources?
- Outline the intervention, materials, frequency (how often), intensity (group size and/or duration), location, and person implementing. This information will be used to write the PMP.
- Is this intervention something every student would benefit from?
 - If yes, consider a whole class intervention.
 - If no, consider a small group intervention.
- Do we have enough information to plan the intervention in detail?
- If not, use RIOT, collect more information and revisit this step.

Step #4: Determine the Data Collection Plan
 How will we know if our intervention was effective?

- What is our progress monitoring tool?
- Does it effectively address the reason for the problem (barrier)?
- What skills should the student be able to apply in the regular classroom as a result of the intervention?
- Is there more than one way to measure the effectiveness of this intervention?
- How much growth would we expect over how much time, given the intervention we have planned?
- Determine the graphical representation of a positive response, a poor response.
- Identify the schedule for data collection.
- Identify person(s) responsible for collecting and entering progress monitoring data.
- Determine schedule for review.
- Record meeting notes in *PLC TEAM MEETING LOG*.

Artifact 2: Email Announcing Response to Intervention Professional Development

COPY OF EMAIL ANNOUNCING HOME TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES IN [REDACTED] 2011)

Pursuant to School Board policy and administrative procedures, this e-mail system is the property of the [REDACTED] to be used for official business only. In addition, all users are cautioned [REDACTED] are subject to the Public Records Law of the State of Florida and also to review by the school system. There should be no expectation of privacy.

School Counselors,

You may or may not be familiar with the local webinars available on [REDACTED] your "RtI for Everyone" group

Following is an overview of what is available, and may be of most interest to you (bold)...

I. RtI/Data Warehouse Webinar Recordings

- a. RtI Student PMP's and Progress Monitoring – Part 3
- b. Opening School RtI Coordinator Webinar 2010-11 (RtI Coordinators)
- c. **Reports in Data Warehouse You Will Love**

At-risk, customized, FCAT, multiple categories, attendance, grades/FCAT, FAIR, DA Summary, Gain

d. **Reports in Data Warehouse You Will Love (powerpoint)**

*suggest that you review this first, then view above for "how to"

e. **RtI and Data Warehouse: Entering Assessment Data**

II. Problem-Solving and RtI Basics (none yet...)

III. Districtwide School RtI Team Webinars

- a. School RtI Team Webinar - 12/1/10
Testing, parents, ESE w/PMP, intervention reminders
- b. School RtI Team Webinar - 12/1/10 (powerpoint)

*suggest you review this first, then view above for discussio

Artifact 3. Professional Development Announcement 1

FLPBS Connect & Share

with live technical assistance

March's Topic:

Help! Tier 1's Not Working

Join representatives from FLPBS schools across the state to discuss guiding questions that schools can use to help identify and problem solve barriers for Tier 1 implementation. Specific strategies will be shared by members of the FLPBS:RtIB Project, followed by a live Question & Answer segment.

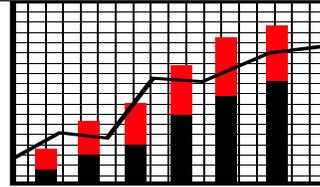
Wednesday, March 2nd
3:00 – 4:00 EST

Link: <http://usf.na4.acrobat.com/openta/>

Participants may submit questions prior to the event through their FLPBS:RtIB Project contact person. Questions submitted prior to the event will be first addressed. Participants may also ask questions by typing into the live chat during and immediately following the presentation; questions will be answered on a first-come, first-serve basis. A technical assistance provider from the FLPBS:RtIB Project will be available to answer questions and facilitate the discussion.

This event **WILL REQUIRE SOUND**. Participants will need a computer with internet access and working speakers. Advanced registration is not required.

If you would like to test your computer prior to the event, type this link into your browser: http://usf.na4.acrobat.com/common/help/en/support/meeting_test.htm



Upcoming

Data Warehouse / Rtl Trainings

“I Created a PMP; Now What?”

March 7, 2011 (3-102) Session # 520243

4:30 – 6 pm

Displaying PMP Data & Making Decisions

March 16, 2011 (3-102) Session # 520244

4:30 – 6 pm

Data Warehouse Reports

March 30, 2011 (3-102) Session # 520245

4:30 – 6 pm

Sign up in today! MIP's awarded.

APPENDIX F
SAMPLE CODING ENTRIES

CODING ENTRIES FOR COPING STRATEGIES THAT LEAD TO TEACHER LEARNING

Questioning as a coping strategy that leads to learning

2/1/9 the goal is to figure out who we're going to recommend, right? Right, so, and see where our kids are

2/1/12 did they say how many kids we should recommend? How should we? (interrupted) So my kids had a really hard time with

2/1/15 so I don't know if you guys want to look at certain areas that we saw, that we've already taught...and we see that they didn't do very well on the testing

2/2/15 should we go across and look at each question and see which questions were the lowest in? Maybe we should to that first

2/3/2 OK, so one area, this would be subtraction, right? Ya, it's just one question

2/3/16 but that numbers chart was skewed, right? It wasn't like the 100's chart that we use, cuz theirs started with 0 and ours starts with 1

2/3/20 (several speaking at once) was that on this test? I'm getting confused.. No it was the SAT 10

2/33/26 maybe we should look at the questions and look at which questions we haven't taught yet, and then not even look at those questions

2/4/8 but which could NOT be true, did we teach that? We haven't taught that

2/4/27 but should we concentrate on, like subtraction, as an issue they need help with?

2/5/3 I mean, because they're going to get subtraction in second grade, right?

2/5/10 so number sense, do you want to start with number sense?

2/5/18 do you just want me to generate a list of students for the group? Should I just keep a list?>

2/8/17 I think we really have to look at it, and try to figure out what really is the issue? Is it that they can't add, or that they're not understanding the problem?

2/9/22 Is that number sense? I would say it is. I would have to look at the standards to see how it.....yes, it's number sense

2/10/24 maybe we can just put all the names and then just weed out the ones who????...ya, ya,

2/11/17 That's a lot of kids... do we want to take the lowest of the low?

FN4/1/5 First thing I am noticing- the questioning of the teachers; seems as if they don't know where to start. Sad they have to learn as they go through the process

FN4/1/5 The meeting was beginning with plenty of uncertainty, interruptions, questioning, and also silent pauses.

FN4/1/11 proceed to group a few ESE students, and then someone questions whether they are using instructional or independent reading levels

FN4/1/14 Then that issue got co-mingled with questioning if they are ending the year on grade level or not,

FN4/1/17 I am impressed with everyone's patience with all the questioning going on...at least they want to do the sorting the right way. Questioning can be good.

FN4/1/20 Then, yet another question is raised by the team leader, about whether this student being offered for a group is actually being retained

FN4/1/23 A new question comes up about promoting with remediation

FN4/2/10 Moving along again. The question of placing students with behavior problems comes up again

M4/1/3 Teachers expressed lots of uncertainty and asked a lot of questions about how to sort the students for next year's classroom groupings

M4/1/4 The questioning about how to use the data really slowed down the process, including whether to use F&P reading levels or the LLI levels that were given

M4/1/13 They also question each other a lot along the way; They seem to want to sort the students the "right way"

M4/1/16 as the team leader kept trying to gain some control of the situation...., questions kept arising from the team, slowing down the process significantly.

M4/1/13 They also question each other a lot along the way; They seem to want to sort the students the "right way", but now one was sure of what that was

2/3/20 (several speaking at once) was that on this test? I'm getting confused.. No it was the SAT 10

FN2/1/9 Noticing a lot of uncertainty...and questions to the group. Note to self: Asking questions is a way they are learning with each other how to analyze data

CODING ENTRIES FOR COPING STRATEGIES THAT LEAD TO TEACHER LEARNING

Collaborating as a Coping Strategy That Leads to Teacher Learning

1/9/3	I want to know what's working for you so I can implement that, so we ended up sharing strategies
1/14/12	we work together collaboratively to figure those dilemmas out (when someone is out of the range of readers in your class)
1/14/15	we also teach the same lesson, we plan together,
1/14/16	so if something is not working, about the way we introduced the lesson of the kids are not getting it, we talk about that
1/14/22	We get ideas, we say, well I did it this way. We revisit the lesson and try it another way and see if it works better using a different strategy.
1/15/6	We talk to make a lesson better
1/17/4	when I was an inclusion teacher I think I learned the most from just watching other teachers teach a lesson
2/1/15	so I don't know if you guys want to look at certain areas that we saw, that we've already taught...and we see that they didn't do very well on the testing
3/2/10	say I need additional supports from the school.... but I first need to talk about it with my team, to collect ideas from other team members
3/2/14	Because I think that if I'm going through it, then my colleagues must be going through it too. then I can go forward,
3/6/11	and we do common homework too. that leaves time to dig deeper, and makes us able to be more creative when we desire
5/9/1	I know that when we had an RTI meeting, they told us that your team is the first place to go,
5/12/23	I felt like that when I came to this team you know, you guys were very consistent; we work together till the end
5/12/31	in 6 weeks... you bring your data back and then they figure out how to put it in the graph together and then you just do it in the meeting, like right away
5/13/11	then we all start learning how to do it
5/13/14	so that way it just gets done in a meeting, and you know, if you don't know how to do something, someone else is there who can help you figure it out
5/14/9	it doesn't have to be everybody, but I think for the most part we would want the majority of the team to help and assist, it would be nice. .
1/3/15	we'll give each other ideas, but still that's where time comes into play
1/16/4	it would also be good to look at the data and find out what other teacher's strengths are because she might actually be great at teaching.....
1/9/9	if it's (RTI) done the way it's supposed to, teachers are going to work together, they have no choice
1/16/8	I don't think we look at the data enough to find out what each other's strengths are, and we all have strength in something
1/9/13	I also share students, like I have a struggling student who was on her students' reading level...so I would send him to her for the interventions
1/14/5	we share kids when we need to, especially when a kid's out of the range of the kids in our class...we ask if you can take them
2/7/20	yes, but we also just started it in first grade, you guys have to help me out....its a very hard concept for 1st graders to understand, place value
5/16/8	everyone's helped with everything, I mean every time something came up that we needed to get done, it was never just me, NEVER,

CODING ENTRIES FOR COPING STRATEGIES THAT LEAD TO TEACHER LEARNING

Initiating self learning to cope with uncertainty surrounding RTI implementation

- 5/1/12 I attended the , a couple workshops provided at the district office which were super helpful
- 5/2/8 so I actually just needed to take the leap and I'm glad that I did cuz I was just scared of it (nervously laughing)
- 5/2/23 of course he searched for that information on his own, and obviously there are improvements,
- 5/3/8 I went to an RTI training in the summer and,...it kind of helped clarify a few things and you hear about RTI...
- 5/3/20 but like some things, I think you have to find it on your own in a way, like I purposely went to that summer training on my own, to get more information
- 5/4/19 If you don't go out there on your own, and take the initiative, and no one's telling us really , there's no...
- FN1/1/8 One teacher mentioned how taking PD for gifted helped with differentiations and his overall teaching for all students
- M5/1/5 One teacher noted taking PD for DW and the new enhancements, along with help topics.
- M5/1/9 He "took the leap:- showed initiative on his own. optional classes being offered this summer
- M5/1/12 doesn't see much improvement over all the staff- except for people who search for info on their own
- M5/1/17 last summer DW training helped her this year, but "overall you have to find it on your own"
- M5/1/23 if you don't search it out on your own, the training isn't there for you
- 1/10/38 I read an article on the new language experience model ...if they can say it they can write about it...

Observing other teachers to cope and to learn

- 1/17/4 when I was an inclusion teacher I think I learned the most from just watching other teachers teach a lesson
- 1/16/14 We did a ...program called instructional rounds at...colleagues come in and observe...I got to go out...I always learned something from it
- 1/16/34 I think that would be nice (team chatter)- to observe other teachers
- 1/16/36 I think it would be nice to observe people more.... But I can honestly say we don'[t do it much
- 1/16/45 when I went to a clinical ed refresher course this year...recommend to use your subs ... to fill in for a teacher who can go observe in another classroom

CODING ENTRIES FOR LEARNING AS A TEAM LEADING TO EVOLVING AS A TEAM

Learning as a TEAM---->Evolving as a team

1/8/34 One thing that happened on our team, we were sharing all kids and we were sharing strategies , because it used to be, you know,
FN1/1/7 J is new to this team this year and she shared strategies- how her former team shared students.
5/9/28 that would be something we could do as a team....dicuss ways we can share kids and give them what they need
M5/2/20 Working as a team and sharing kids across the team would be a next step, to give them what they need.
M5/2/21 T5 supported that idea, struggled with some of her higher kids being held back since her other kids were so low .
FN1/1/8 One teacher mentioned how taking PD for gifted helped with differentiations and his overall teaching for all students
M5/2/25 idea of writing PMP in the meetings, reviewing data together in 6 weeks and data input together so all learn from each other at the same time.
M5/5/4 I was pleased that they came up with changes for what their team does next year, based on these focus group interviews
3/5/32 we have posted plans in the past, but this year we have been the most consistent.
3/6/1 yes, This is the 3rd year I think, that we tried to have plans posted. This year we really did it and we really shared the planning
3/6/17 and we do common testing this year too
3/6/18 hearing you say is that your team really did evolve this year, and that the common planning, homework and testing has been very beneficial to all of you. (agreement)
3/6/4 - I am not sure why we got more consistent this year, but with the new math curriculum, it really helped a lot
5/12/27 I've heard of other teams coming and they bring information and they actually write the PMP in the meetings, and whoever knows it types it in, or whoever knows how
FN3/1/29 They questioned why they were more consistent this year
Fn3/1/28 Stated this year has been the most consistent the team has ever been about posting plans for each other.
M5/2/23 having more discussion, and make decisions instead of letting things go after discussing.
M5/2/25 idea of writing PMP in the meetings, reviewing data together in 6 weeks and data input together so all learn from each other at the same time.
M5/3/5 TL said- This discussion has given them things to think about for next year..
5/10/7 but I do
5/11/30 Yea, so that way it just gets done in a meeting..someone is there to help you , and it all gets done quickly
5/13/5 sound like we have some things to think about now, like planning meetings, and scheduling.
5/13/5 it sound like we have some things to think about now, like planning meetings, and scheduling.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Michele Marie (Edgar) Meyer received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1980 from Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa, with a double major in business finance and economics. She completed coursework to receive Florida teacher certification in elementary education in 1993, having rediscovered her passion for learning while helping her three children learn to read. Following up on a promise to her economics professor in her bachelor's program that she would one day get her master's degree, Michele received a Master of Arts degree in counseling education in 1998 from the University of South Florida. Michele's passion for analytical thinking, coupled with her desire to help people, culminated in extensive opportunities to help others as a school and community counselor. When Michele's third child went off to college, she continued her education again when the school district and the University of Florida announced the opportunity to be in this distance learning educational leadership cohort. Michele received her Specialist in Education degree in 2009 and her Doctor of Education degree (Ed.D.) in educational leadership in 2012. She looks forward to exploring new ways to contribute to the field of education.