TURNING PROMISING THEORY INTO PRODUCTIVE PRACTICE: 
THE PERSPECTIVES OF EDUCATORS PILOTING THE RESPONSIVENESS 
TO INTERVENTION MODEL IN ONE ONTARIO SCHOOL DISTRICT 

by 
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ABSTRACT

*Education for All* (2005) offers a developmentally appropriate plan based on responsiveness to intervention (RTI) research. The model, termed the tiered approach, advocates intervention as a step in the process of identification which involves closely monitoring students in the primary years and providing additional support through direct instruction and increased monitoring of students who are at-risk. There are numerous empirical studies discussing the potential benefits of the RTI model (Feiker Hollenbeck, 2007; Fuchs & Deshler, 2007). However, the promise of a theory is never enough to ensure a change in the practice of teachers or an improvement in the learning of students. Since it is the teachers who will alter their classroom practice and systematically monitor student progress in order to decide whether suitable learning trajectories are being achieved, researchers must examine how best to support teachers in the face of such change. This study describes, through the use of focus group data, teachers’ views of their experiences participating in a pilot project of the RTI model. While exploring the supports and barriers that these teachers face in the first year of implementing the RTI model, this study describes the limitations imposed by the teachers’ perceived lack of empowerment throughout the pilot project.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A thesis is not a solo project but rather one that interweaves the knowledge of many. I would like to take this opportunity to thank those whose dedication made this research possible.

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Thank you to Nancy Hutchinson, my committee member, who went far and above what was required of her. Her ability to guide while supporting my decisions allowed me to challenge my perceptions of what is important in research and tell the teachers’ stories in an honest and respectful way.

Thank you to the teachers, whose willingness to share their stories allowed me a glimpse of what is necessary for true change to occur.

Thank you to my parents, who always encouraged me to make the impossible a reality. To my Dad, whose pride in me gives me strength. To my Mom, whose courage and determination continue to inspire me. Her short life taught me it’s not how long you’re here but what you do with the time that matters most.

Thank you to Sharon, whose willingness to listen and thoughtfully discuss my research, and education in general, kept me grounded in the reality of the classroom. And thank you to Allan, whose support was unwavering.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Before beginning the Master’s of Education program, I was a teacher in the elementary panel. For six of these years, I worked with early learners. During this time I met Zachary, a child who changed my perspective for the better. When Zachary walked through the classroom door for the first time with curious eyes and a tentative smile I had no idea what our time together would entail. Beyond that angelic face was a boy who did not know his letters. He did not know his numbers, he had little experience with books, and he struggled to follow instructions and socialize with peers. For two years Zachary and I worked together, sometimes succeeding and sometimes struggling. What I wanted was to help him, to provide the support that would unlock what I felt strongly was inside him and to ensure that this support would continue when our time together ended.

However, in talking with special education teachers within my school and the consultants from the board, they all gave me the same response; Zachary was too young to qualify for any assistance. And so while he made progress, great progress, when he left for first grade he wasn’t ready. I have since worked with many Zacharys and have struggled to find the support necessary to help them succeed in the face of an increasingly academic curriculum. In my opinion, the current special education system does not adequately support the learning of students in the early years. Instead, it waits for children to fail, leaving classroom teachers to support the students during this waiting period. This struggle has inspired my research.

1 The name has been changed to protect the anonymity of the child.
Rationale

For decades, researchers have examined how best to identify young students with learning needs and implement early literacy intervention programs (e.g., Keogh & Becker, 1973; Steele, 2004). Many of these studies have demonstrated that letter identification and phonemic awareness can be used to successfully identify students who are at-risk for later learning difficulties (e.g., McNamara, Scissons, & Dahleu, 2005). Further research has shown the benefits of using this knowledge to provide early intervention to these students (e.g., Steele, 2004). The responsiveness to intervention (RTI) model provides the opportunity to identify students at-risk for later learning difficulties and to provide them with intervention earlier in their academic careers. This model advocates the use of intervention as a step in the identification of students who are at-risk which involves closely monitoring students in the primary years and providing additional support through direct instruction and increased monitoring of students who are at-risk. However, while there are numerous empirical studies discussing the potential benefits of the RTI model (e.g., Feiker Hollenbeck, 2007; Fuchs & Deshler, 2007), the promise of a theory is never enough to ensure improvement in the practice of teachers or the learning of students. While empirical data can be convincing to the researcher, it is the actual impact on classroom practice and on student learning trajectories that tend to demonstrate the practical success of a program to teachers.

The implementation of the RTI model requires significant change in how teachers work with students who are not meeting expectations (Kratochwill, Volpiansky, Clements, & Ball, 2007). In the face of such change, researchers must examine how best to support teachers. For, in the RTI model, it is the teachers who will systematically
monitor student progress in order to determine whether suitable learning trajectories are being achieved and thereby alter their classroom practice accordingly. The program implementation research provides descriptions of how we can support teachers in this endeavour.

Much of the research on program implementation describes common conditions that are necessary for the successful implementation of new school programs including providing teachers with information concerning content and pedagogical knowledge, as well as time both for independent thought and for collaboration (e.g., Guskey, 2003). This study sought to determine if these same supports contributed to the implementation of the responsiveness to intervention model and to describe any additional supports that benefited teachers as they attempted to integrate RTI into their classroom practice. These supports address implementation through the lens of program instruction, that is, helping teachers understand the program that is being implemented and how best to integrate it into their classrooms and schools. As described earlier, most teachers must make dramatic changes to their thinking and practice to ensure the success of the RTI model. Providing supports in the form of program instruction may facilitate this change. However, I posit that there is another dimension to this support that must be addressed. As the RTI model requires teachers to be confident instructional decision makers, teacher empowerment plays a central role. This empowerment will allow teachers to make informed decisions within their own classrooms, which is a necessity if this model is to become an integral part of their practice.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to describe the views of teachers who participated in a five school pilot project of the responsiveness to intervention model. These teachers
participated in a larger study conducted in a mid-sized board in southern central Ontario. This larger research initiative sought to determine the benefits of RTI to student literacy achievement, the increased capacity of classroom teachers to provide literacy instruction to all students, the viability of the model, as well as the enablers and barriers to bringing RTI and progress monitoring into classrooms. It is the qualitative teacher focus group data, addressing the viability of the model as well as the enablers and barriers, that is the focus of my research in this thesis. I begin by describing the support structure that facilitated the implementation of the RTI model including both the supports and the barriers teachers faced. The teachers’ views on the success of RTI in their own classrooms is also described which involves reporting how teachers felt RTI impacted their classroom practice. I also describe the role that teacher empowerment played in this pilot through teachers’ descriptions of the feelings of deprofessionalization they experienced. In summary, I seek to answer the following questions from the perspective of classroom teachers: (a) how teachers describe the supports that were in place to facilitate the implementation of RTI, (b) the barriers that these teachers faced, (c) how teachers describe the impact RTI had on their practice, and, finally, (d) the role of teacher empowerment in the implementation of the RTI model.

Summary

The role of teachers in the implementation of the responsiveness to intervention model is a key element in its success. Teachers must be provided with the necessary knowledge and motivation to integrate the new expectations of this model into their teaching practice. To ensure that this information is adequate and accurate, we must look to the extant research concerning early intervention, the responsiveness to intervention
model, implementation, and empowerment. This literature provides a lens through which we can examine the perspectives of the teachers in this pilot.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I begin by reviewing the early literacy intervention literature to demonstrate the need for this type of intervention in Ontario schools. I then present the responsiveness to intervention model as a method for integrating this intervention into classrooms. Because teachers are key participants in the implementation of RTI, I then review the professional development literature. This discussion is complemented by a review of the empowerment literature to demonstrate the important role that teacher empowerment can play in the implementation of the RTI model.

Early Literacy Intervention

In order for educators to help all children reach their potential, the children must be provided with the necessary academic support. This is especially important in the early years as “the importance of early reading cannot be underestimated. Children who struggle with reading in the early grades will often remain behind their peers throughout school, and academic progress in all subject areas suffers” (McIntyre et al., 2005, p. 99).

Early intervention programs provide students with the opportunity to gain the essential language skills that provide the foundation for later learning (Steele, 2004). When teachers shift the focus from learning to read to reading to learn around Grade four, those students who lack solid reading skills will quickly fall behind. Children who are reading well will read more and comprehend more: as a result they will learn more. Children who struggle with their reading will read less and have lower comprehension: as a result they will learn less. This situation, known as the Matthew effect (Stanovich, 1986), results in children falling further and further behind in all areas of their learning. The sobering reality is that studies have shown that this effect can begin as early as Grade
one (McNamara et al., 2005). Furthermore, reading achievement in Grade one has been shown to predict reading achievement in Grade eleven (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). Thus, we must provide students who are at-risk with the opportunity to develop essential language skills before the Matthew effect can begin.

There is a growing body of research demonstrating the types of skills that students must have in order to become successful readers. These skills include letter identification and phonemic awareness (McNamara et al., 2005; MacCoubrey, Wade-Woolley, Klinger, & Kirby, 2004). It is important that we use this information to ensure support for students in the present that will provide the foundation for their later learning (Steele, 2004).

“Research has clearly demonstrated that early intervention can produce substantial improvements in language based learning” (Harrison, 2005, p. 25). Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, and Fenuelle (2006) demonstrated that students who received early intervention showed marked improvement in their literacy skills. The more telling findings from this study indicated that this improvement was not only immediate, but it was also still present at the end of Grade three (Vellutino et al., 2006). In contrast, students who receive remediation in the later grades must improve their skills at a much faster rate than their typically achieving peers if they are to close the gap, a difficult task for struggling students. Therefore remediation that occurs beyond the primary grades must be much more intense and frequent to yield even modest results (Torgesen, 2004).

The Responsiveness to Intervention (RTI) Model

With the continued documentation of the benefits of preventive intervention, we must turn our focus to the implementation of this support for younger students. In the document *Education for All* (2005), the Ontario Ministry of Education offers a
developmentally appropriate plan based on responsiveness to intervention research which provides the opportunity to intervene with students as early as Kindergarten. The model, termed the tiered approach, advocates intervention as a step in the process of prevention and identification. In the first tier, which begins in Kindergarten, teachers are expected to use scientifically validated instructional strategies to ensure high quality programming for all students. “‘Scientifically validated’ refers to a process of experimentation by which the importance of an instructional procedure or curriculum has been tested” (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007, p. 131). As well, this teaching must consist of explicit instruction.

“Explicit instruction means that the teacher models and teaches skills and concepts clearly, rather than requiring the student to make inferences that may lead to confusion in less-proficient learners” (Denton, Vaughn, & Fletcher, 2003, p. 202). This teaching is to be implemented with embedded assessment techniques. The collection of frequent data should then be used to systematically monitor the progress of students who are at-risk. Based on this progress, teachers will plan instructional activities that facilitate student learning and ensure continued growth. Continual monitoring is required to ensure that the necessary instructional modifications are made to facilitate the improvement of student learning trajectories (Richards, Pavri, Golez, Canges, & Murphy, 2007). Those students who do not respond to first tier instruction are recommended for the second tier. In the second tier, struggling students receive more intense and more frequent intervention, either individually or in small groups, in addition to their regular classroom instruction and more frequent progress monitoring.

The tiered model proposed in Education for All (2005) acknowledges that not all students will demonstrate substantial improvement as a result of early intervention. This type of intervention is most effective in assisting those students who struggle because of
environmental factors such as inadequate opportunities to develop the requisite language skills (Vellutino et al., 2006). For students who continue to show little or no improvement, a third tier is provided. At this point, students are referred for psycho-educational assessment and possible special education identification. The information gathered during all tiers of the intervention serves to help develop individualized plans to support these students.

Simmons et al. (2008) used a longitudinal study to explore the use of a responsiveness to intervention model in altering the learning trajectories of students identified as at-risk in Kindergarten. The students’ initial risk status was determined using a letter-naming fluency measure. Those students, who fell below the 30th percentile based on the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) system-wide database were deemed to be at-risk. Forty-one students were identified and tracked until the third grade. They received intensive small group instruction in beginning reading skills such as phonemic awareness, phonemic decoding, and word reading. This explicit instruction was provided by certified teachers or highly trained paraprofessionals. The students’ risk status was re-evaluated each fall over a four year period. Intervention was continued only if the students remained below the 30th percentile on the DIBELS ORF (Oral Reading Fluency). The results of this study indicated that the “absolute performance levels, on average, across a range of reading measures attained at the end of Kindergarten positioned students for trajectories of reading performance that exceeded the 50th percentile on the majority of measures” (Simmons et al., 2008, p. 169). They further stated that the typical student who was at-risk in the fall of Kindergarten moved out of risk and stayed out of risk during the Kindergarten through third grade period in which they were tested. While these are positive and encouraging results, the one difficulty with
this study is the frequency with which these students were reassessed. A yearly
reassessment does not allow for the frequent within-year adjustments that are central to
the RTI model. That being said, the study does demonstrate the positive effects of both
early intervention involving the explicit instruction of early reading skills and the regular
monitoring of student learning trajectories.

Both the model described by Simmons et al. (2008) and the tiered approach
described in Education for All (2005) are in opposition to the current identification model
used in Ontario. The discrepancy-based model, which is currently used in school boards
throughout Ontario, requires that students be intellectually capable of achieving at their
own grade level but be performing at a grade level that it is at least two years behind
(McNamara et al., 2005; Richards et al., 2007). As such, it is common practice to wait
until Grade 3 or 4 to identify students. As a result, several years are lost that could be
used to intervene; and the time lost is the time when intervention tends to be most
effective. Harrison (2005) asserts that this waiting period must be eliminated while also
stating that inherent flaws exist within the current discrepancy-based model. One major
flaw is the use of grade level scores as the mean, which many researchers agree is not
statistically defensible and as a result is not a recommended method for identifying a
learning disability (e.g., Harrison, 2005; Siegel, 1989; Stanovich, 1991). As well, the use
of IQ data is flawed as “most studies do not identify a strong relation, particularly an
interaction that would demonstrate differential effects of the intervention across levels of
IQ” (Fletcher, Lyons, Fuchs, & Barnes, 2007, p. 37). This difficulty is further
compounded by the reality that there is little evidence supporting the position that
struggling learners with a learning disability diagnosed through an IQ-achievement
discrepancy and struggling learners with no identification respond differently to
remediation (Fletcher et al., 2007). Another flaw is that the discrepancy-based model requires that students “fail” before any support is received, this lack of support can lead to secondary emotional effects such as frustration, anxiety, and low self-concept (Steele, 2004). There are also various negative effects specific to reading failure, including a loss of motivation and interest in reading, as well as the loss of opportunities to build fluency accessed through regular reading practice (Torgesen, 2004).

The response to intervention method offers an alternative to the flawed discrepancy-based model, as it provides the opportunity for timely intervention for all students, regardless of the cause of their difficulties (Harrison, 2005). However, RTI is not without its critics.

The RTI Debate

The most common debate about RTI stems from the difference between how a learning disability (LD) is defined by jurisdictions such as Ontario and how it may be defined within the RTI framework. The current definition describes a learning disability as a discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement, while the RTI model classifies students as LD when there is a failure to respond to intervention. Kavale, Holdnack, and Mostert clearly state the difficulties that arise from this proposal: “At best, the RTI model can only infer that a process deficit exists and, without direct assessment, there is no way to determine if a student may possess [a specific learning disability] as currently conceptualized” (2006, p. 115). While some may perceive the potential change in the definition of an LD as problematic, not all implementations of this model seek to modify the existing definition. In fact, the Education for All (2005) document, when describing the tiered approach, clearly states that:
These students may need to be referred for more extensive psycho-educational assessment. This type of assessment information, coupled with classroom observations and teacher assessment of the students’ previous responses to intervention strategies, can then be used to guide more specialized instruction. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 60)

In making this statement, the report is confirming that within its proposed model, the redefinition of learning disability is not necessary for the implementation of responsiveness to intervention. As such, in the tiered model, an LD diagnosis is not required to access varying levels of support. However, the possibility of a diagnosis is still available should intervention not result in the improvement of student learning trajectories.

Another major criticism of the RTI model is the types of instruction that have been used in strictly monitored empirical studies. While the effectiveness of frequent monitoring and increased individual and group sessions with students has been demonstrated, some critics of the RTI model have suggested that these types of instruction are impractical when translated from a research setting to the classroom. Gerber addresses this point: “Theoretically, RTI rests on shaky ground when it substitutes an idealized, highly controlled kind of instruction for teaching as it actually occurs in applied settings” (2005, p. 522). This is one of the issues that I hope to address in this study by gathering information directly from the teachers who have attempted to implement the tiered approach in their own classrooms. My aim is to ascertain teachers’ perceptions of the effect that RTI implementation has had on their teaching practice and their perceptions of supports that were in place to facilitate implementation. Thus, it is
essential to address the implementation research that will provide some insight into the conditions necessary to promote the successful integration of RTI in classrooms.

Supporting Teachers in Program Implementation

“RTI, implemented within the context of a multitier prevention model, is perhaps, more than any other school improvement strategy, equally dependent on the skill of educators and the system in which RTI occurs” (Kratochwill, Volpiosnky, Clements, & Ball, 2007, p. 624). This model places teachers at the centre of the identification process, as they are the primary assessors and decision makers during both the first and second tiers of the model. With teachers as the focus, Hasbrouck, Woldbeck, Ihnot, and Parker (1999) provide the ideal starting point for a discussion of the conditions necessary to support the implementation of responsiveness to intervention. The authors begin with a description of a disillusioned teacher, Candyce Ihnot, forced to work within a progress monitoring framework using curriculum-based measurement (CBM). This framework is similar to the progress monitoring included in the RTI model in that it requires teachers to gather frequent data on student learning trajectories. In CBM as well as in RTI, teachers are then expected to use these data to make instructional decisions to promote improvements in student learning. Candyce was in the midst of a top-down program implementation of CBM and was thus mandated to complete CBM for all the students she was working with in her role as a special education teacher. She was furious:

My first reaction to this new mandate was anger: “My job is teaching. I do not feel I have enough time to do my job well as it is. Why should I take so much time away from my teaching to assess and do even more paperwork?” (Hasbrouck et al., 1999, p. 118)
However, by the time the article was complete, Candyce had substantially changed her viewpoint. She now viewed CBM as an invaluable piece of her teaching practice:

In fact, if they were to say to me, “Candyce, you may no longer use CBM,” I would go back to that same closet, gather all my kids back there with a flashlight, and use CBM with them. I just cannot teach without it. (Hasbrouck et al., 1999, p. 118)

So how can we help teachers navigate the path Candyce followed from anger to investment?

There is limited information provided in Hasbrouck et al.’s (1999) article about the process Candyce took as she traversed this difficult path. Fuchs and Deshler’s (2007) description of the school- and the district-wide conditions that support the successful implementation of the responsiveness to intervention model may help to decode the minimal information that is reported regarding the support structure in which Candyce successfully implemented CBM. Fuchs and Deshler (2007) state that, since teachers require a range of new skills, the school and school board must provide considerable and sustained professional development programs to facilitate the learning of these new skills. This description supports Candyce’s statement that her “training was thorough and of high quality” (Hasbrouck et al., 1999, p. 125). She also espouses the benefits of the support she received from experts and colleagues as she began to explore a new and unfamiliar practice including the time to meet with peers, both listening to success stories and problem solving collaboratively (Hasbrouck et al., 1999). These statements further parallels Fuchs and Deshler’s (2007) position as they describe the importance of providing teachers with the time to think about and discuss how best to integrate their learning into their classroom practice. Since RTI requires a significant change in how
teachers think and work, many researchers agree with Fuchs and Deshler that effective professional development is essential to the successful implementation of RTI within the school setting (e.g. Denton, Vaughn, & Fletcher, 2003). As the research concerning RTI implementation is limited, the professional development literature provides a lens through which we can further explore RTI implementation.

Figure 1 displays an illustration of Guskey’s (2002) three main goals of professional development:

![Diagram of Guskey's Goals of Professional Development]

**Figure 1: Guskey’s Goals of Professional Development**

According to this model, the first goal of professional development is to change teacher practice. It is this change in instructional approach, materials, curriculum, or teaching procedures, that results in a change in student learning outcomes. Guskey (2002) posits that the change in teachers’ attitudes and beliefs is a result of the perceived changes in student learning outcomes and not a direct result of the professional development itself. “They believe it works because they have seen it work, and that experience shapes their attitudes and beliefs” (Guskey, 2002, p. 383). Clearly these elements all played a role in Candyce’s journey. There was a change in Candyce’s teaching practice through the inclusion of CBM. The change in her students’ learning outcomes is illustrated in Hasbrouck et al.’s (1999) article through six case studies of students that Candyce worked with since beginning CBM, all of whom showed growth in their reading abilities. This
student improvement resulted in the drastic change in Candyce’s attitudes and beliefs that is demonstrated by the dramatic difference in the statements quoted above.

While Guskey’s (2002) three goals appear to have been considered in the development of the support structure in which Candyce worked, I am left wondering her professional development was organized. What format was followed in her “thorough and high quality training” (Hasbrouck et al., 1999, p. 125)? What information was shared with her and by whom? When and how often did she receive this training? How were the collaborative opportunities in which she participated structured? And when did these opportunities take place?

For professional development to alter teacher practice, student learning, and teacher attitudes and beliefs, as Guskey (2002) has recommended, the commonly used one-shot workshop and conference attendance is not sufficient because this type of professional development does not fundamentally alter teachers’ knowledge and practice (Boyle, Lamprianou, & Boyle, 2005). And so, with support for Guskey’s goals provided through Candyce’s experience, I turn to his examination of 13 lists that describe the characteristics of effective professional development (Guskey, 2003). Through this examination he sought to find the commonalities amongst the lists from the American Federation of Teachers, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Education Development Center, Educational Research Service, Education Testing Service, Eisenhower Professional Development Program, National Governors’ Association, National Institute for Science Education, National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, National Staff Development Council, and U.S. Department of Education (Guskey, 2003). As a result of this examination, Guskey concluded that these lists varied widely in how they were derived, the criteria they used to
determine effectiveness, and the characteristics that they described. However, he described six common goals:

1) The enhancement of teachers’ content and pedagogical knowledge
2) The provision of sufficient time that is well organized, carefully structured, and purposefully directed
3) The promotion of collegiality and collaborative exchange that is structured and purposeful, with efforts guided by clear goals for improving student learning
4) The inclusion of evaluation procedures
5) The alignment of professional development with other reform initiatives and the modeling of high-quality instruction
6) Decisions concerning professional development should be made through carefully organized collaboration between site-based educators, who are keenly aware of critical contextual characteristics, and district-level personnel, who have broader perspectives on problems

(Guskey, 2003, p. 749)

While Guskey did deduce commonalities amongst the various lists, he concluded that the influences and contexts of professional development are highly complex, and as such, may limit the researcher’s ability to provide a single list that will facilitate effective professional development in all contexts. However, this list of common characteristics does provide me with a starting point from which I can begin to examine studies of program implementation.

Kinnucan-Welsch, Rosemary, and Grogan (2006) also used a review of the professional development literature to establish their six principles of high quality professional development. These principles were shared in their study describing the
success of The Literacy Specialist Project (LSP) exploring the implementation of Teaching Reading and Writing: A Core Curriculum for Educators. This study involved 14 faculty members from 10 different universities who met monthly with the 353 literacy specialists. In turn, the literacy specialists met with 2,490 teachers from 122 school districts throughout the state of Ohio. There were 15 meetings during the school year at which time literacy specialists presented and discussed literacy teaching practices and learning concepts in groups of 10 to 15 teachers. In these meetings participants had the opportunity to apply this information to student data. Literacy specialists also provided in-class coaching. The professional development model used in this project was evaluated by the researchers using six principles found in the literature. These principles were supported by varying professional development strategies that are outlined in Table 2.1. This table was created from the information presented in Kinnucan-Welsch et al. (2006).

Table 2.1: Kinnucan-Welsch et al.’s Six Principles of Professional Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Description</th>
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| 1) PD directly connects to student learning goals that are clear and accepted by all | • core curriculum sessions addressed the supports necessary for student literacy learning  
• e.g., in the first session teachers were introduced to developmental continua that addressed reading, writing, orthographic, and oral language development. These continua were referenced throughout the remaining sessions and were also used to analyze the work of students from individual teachers’ classes. |
| 2) PD involves active learning for teachers | • teachers were given “fieldwork” between sessions that involved gathering information from their own students to be addressed in the following session  
• by bringing in their own students’ |
work, teachers were able to integrate the theoretical knowledge into their classroom practice allowing for greater internalization of materials and for their learning to have a direct impact on their practice.

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<th>3)</th>
<th>PD is embedded in the context of work in schools and classrooms</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• teachers were to record and transcribe their own teaching</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• transcripts were analyzed by the teacher to aid in their reflection on their practice</td>
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<th>4)</th>
<th>PD is continuous and ongoing</th>
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<td>• the project spanned the entire academic year with some teachers opting to participate in subsequent years</td>
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<th>5)</th>
<th>PD is based on an ongoing and focused inquiry related to teacher learning, student learning, and what we know about good instruction</th>
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<td></td>
<td>• teachers met with literacy specialists after teaching and transcribing four lessons with a specific instructional focus to collaboratively analyze their instruction and receive feedback</td>
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<th>6)</th>
<th>Coherence is evident in all aspects of the professional development system</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• teachers participated in collaborative discussions that focused on practice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kinnucan-Welsch et al., 2006, pp. 427–430

Relating their six principles to Guskey’s (2003) six common characteristics, there are definite similarities. For instance, in Guskey’s third common characteristic, he states that professional development efforts should be “guided by clear goals for improving student learning” (2003, p. 749). Kinnucan-Welsch et al. mirror this characteristic with their first principle, which states that professional development must “connect to student learning goals” (2006, p. 427). As well, Guskey describes the need for professional development to be “aligned with other reform initiatives” (2003, p. 749). Kinnucan-Welsch et al. show clear agreement as they state that “coherence is evident in all aspects of the professional development system” (2006, p. 430). Other similarities are found
when you look to the messages that are inherent within Kinnucan-Welsch et al.’s professional development model. For instance, Guskey describes the importance of enhancing teachers’ content and pedagogical knowledge. A clear parallel can be drawn to Kinnucan-Welsch et al.’s core curriculum sessions as the reported intention of these sessions was to address the knowledge levels and skills of the teachers. With so many similarities, I am left wondering how Kinnucan-Welsch et al.’s theoretically sound model fared in the face of Guskey’s (2002) three goals of professional development.

To examine the success rates of implementation, pre- and post-surveys were completed by participating teachers. Teachers self-reported their knowledge of literacy concepts by rating their level of understanding of 24 items on a five point Likert scale. The researchers described statistically significant results throughout all three years of reported implementation that described success in two of Guskey’s goals of professional development: “We concluded that teachers who have participated in the LSP report differences in beliefs and practice [italics added]” (Kinnucan-Welsch et al., 2006, p. 434). However, the data collection methods discussed in this paper did not address the effect that the change in practice had on student learning, which, according to Guskey, is “professional development’s ultimate goal” (2003, p. 750). As well, without knowing any of the questions that were included on the teacher survey, I can only posit, based on the researchers’ description of the survey, that it addressed the change in their “understanding of literacy concepts” (Kinnucan-Welsch et al., 2006, p. 430). Changing the teachers’ understanding of literacy concepts could facilitate a change in teacher practice, accomplishing Guskey’s first goal (2002). However, it does not guarantee a change in teachers’ attitudes and beliefs.
Klingner, Ahwee, Pilonieta, and Menendez (2003) followed a similar model of professional development but with the added dimension of addressing the potential barriers to success from the outset of the study. This study was conducted across six sites with 29 pre-Kindergarten through Grade five teachers participating. Participants were asked to implement at least one of four research-based instructional practices in their classrooms: partner reading, collaborative strategic reading, making words, or phonological awareness. As with Kinnucan-Welsch et al. (2006), there is evidence of a relationship between the model used in this study and the six common characteristics of professional development described by Guskey (2003).

Guskey (2003) began his list of characteristics with the enhancement of teachers’ content and pedagogical knowledge. In Klingner et. al’s (2003) model, a belief in the importance of increasing teacher knowledge was evidenced through teachers’ attendance at 65 hours of training in the four instructional practices listed above. Guskey went on to describe the essential provision of sufficient time that is well organized, carefully structured, and purposefully directed. In this study, teachers were provided with follow-up support throughout the year allowing ample time for the internalization of the information. As well, a booster session was conducted midway through the year to provide additional information about each instructional strategy. Guskey’s third characteristic described the promotion of collegiality and collaborative exchange that is structured and purposeful. Klingner et al. considered this element, encouraging networking both within and across sites throughout the year. As well, collaborative problem solving took place amongst graduate assistants and school personnel. This collaboration also fulfilled Guskey’s fourth characteristic through the inclusion of evaluation procedures. Graduate assistants, who were extensively trained in all four
instructional strategies, visited the school weekly throughout the school year to provide both performance feedback and support for participants when needed. The selection of four instructional strategies, based on research-based success in facilitating the literacy learning of students, demonstrated adherence to Guskey’s fifth characteristic, the alignment of professional development with other reform initiatives and the modeling of high-quality instruction. Guskey’s sixth and final characteristic addressed decision making in professional development, asserting that decisions should be made through carefully organized collaboration between the site-based educators who have an awareness of contextual characteristics, and the district-level personnel who have broader perspectives on issues. The weekly research team meetings between graduate assistants and the principal investigator, as well as the midpoint meeting between researchers and teachers to discuss successes and challenges, helped to ensure that all perspectives were considered in this study.

To examine the success rates of implementation achieved through the use of this model, Klingner et al. (2003) used several data collection methods including individual interviews both pre- and post-, teacher logs, researcher logs, classroom observations, and implementation validity checklists. These tools revealed varying levels of success amongst their participants. Based on this information, the researchers divided their participants into three groups: high-implementing (HI), moderate-implementing (MI), and low-implementing (LI). The size of these groups and their rates of implementation are presented in Table 2.2. This table was created from the data presented in Klingner et al. (2003).
Once again, I return to Guskey’s goals of professional development to analyze the results. Through weekly logs and post-interviews, high implementing teachers described “sufficient preparation (knowing the strategies)” (Klingner et al., 2003, p. 423) as facilitating the implementation of the new teaching strategies. These descriptions demonstrate support for Guskey’s first goal of change in teacher practice. The researchers also stated that HI teachers frequently described the benefits to their students’ learning, thus demonstrating support for Guskey’s (2002) second goal of improving student learning. In discussing Guskey’s third goal of change in teacher attitudes and beliefs, I must acknowledge that there is no direct discussion of teachers’ beliefs or attitudes. I can only posit that those teachers who implemented with high fidelity and saw the results in their students reframed their beliefs to include the importance of the teaching strategy they integrated. So, if the researchers understood the importance of Guskey’s (2002) goals and implemented a model containing the six common characteristics of effective professional development to support this change, how is it possible that this initiative resulted in only one third of the participants implementing the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
<th>Rate of implementation</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HI</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>• implemented one strategy at least 29 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MI</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>• implemented one strategy between 11 and 29 times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LI</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>• implemented one strategy 10 times or less</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
strategies with high fidelity and a further third of the participants implementing the new practices very little or not at all? Seemingly, these researchers have done everything on the list. So what went wrong?

Clearly, simply providing teachers with the necessary information, resources, and time does not guarantee the successful implementation of new teaching practices. I posit that, if teachers are to make the significant long-term changes to their programming required by the RTI model, then they must support its implementation. Teacher empowerment literature provides further insight into the conditions that may help increase teacher support for, understanding of, and commitment to the RTI model.

Teacher Empowerment

In the RTI model, teachers must be decision makers, using the data that they gather to guide the planning of instructional activities that will benefit student learning. As such, they must be empowered to confidently make informed decisions within their own classrooms. In his book *The Empowerment of Teachers* (1988), Maeroff discusses the importance of teacher confidence and independent decision making during program implementation. He defines teacher empowerment as: “the power to exercise one’s craft with confidence and to help shape the way the job is to be done” (Maeroff, 1988, p. 4). To facilitate teacher empowerment during program implementation, he describes three elements:

1. boosting teacher status
2. increasing teacher knowledge
3. providing teachers with the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues

(Maeroff, 1988, pp. 6–7)
The second two elements closely mirror two of the six common goals of professional development described by Guskey (2003). However, the first element adds another dimension by asking us to consider the importance of teacher status.

According to Maeroff (1988), boosting teacher status is the first element of teacher empowerment. Boosting teacher status means communicating to teachers that they are professionals and in turn treating them as such. “In other words, as professionals, teachers are in charge of their own practice” (Wan, 2005, p. 844). This professionalization is necessary in an RTI framework where teachers are expected to be instructional decision makers. In their empirical study of teacher decision making, Rice and Schneider (1994) gave questionnaires to 261 teachers from 22 schools. On these questionnaires, teachers used a four-point Likert scale to indicate their decision involvement within their classroom and within the school as a whole; they also completed a job satisfaction survey. The results demonstrated a strong correlation between the teachers’ involvement in decision making and their job satisfaction. In terms of Maeroff’s theory of empowerment, professionalization plays a significant role. Including teachers in decision making demonstrates a support for this professionalization, thus boosting teacher status by “allowing them to exercise their judgment in matters related to instruction as well as school-wide issues that extend beyond their individual classrooms” (Wan, 2005, p. 845).

This status is further elevated through increasing teachers’ knowledge base. For teachers to be able to make instructional decisions that will benefit their students, they must be knowledgeable in their subject area. In the context of this RTI pilot project, the teachers must be knowledgeable about the processes involved in learning to read and about the best instructional strategies to facilitate this learning. Providing teachers with
professional development in this area will strengthen teachers’ understanding, thus providing teachers with a revived sense of power (Maeroff, 1988). This empowerment is especially important when asking teachers to introduce a new teaching practice into their classrooms as things that are unfamiliar can sometimes elicit discomfort and fear (Fang, Fu, & Leonard Lamme, 2004), potentially leading to a lack of implementation. “When faced with too many challenges and discord between new knowledge and existing knowledge, it is sometimes easier to revert back to known and familiar patterns” (Klingner et al., 2003, p. 413).

Fang, Fu, and Leonard Lamme (2004) begin their article with the words of a teacher who described the fear involved in implementing a new and unfamiliar program:

When I became involved with the professional development project, I felt that I was ready for a change. I was ready to give up the teacher-centered classroom. But it was much more difficult than I had anticipated…Moving away from the basal…was scary. At first, I felt a loss of control, and I wasn’t sure that I liked it. (Fang et al., 2004, p. 58)

The authors proceed to describe a four year professional development project that was designed to help literacy teachers improve their instruction through abandoning commercial language programs and designing their own instruction that catered to the needs of their students. This study took place in six schools, where teachers participated in an annual summer institute, regular classroom visits by university faculty, monthly meetings, and an end of the year showcase meeting. The annual summer institute provides a different and, I posit, empowering approach to professional development. The purpose of this institute was “for teachers to extend and refine their knowledge base about literacy teaching, learning and assessment” (Fang et al., 2004, p. 60). What differentiates
this institute from professional development sessions discussed in other studies described in this thesis is that, while teachers did listen to presentations by university faculty, they also read professional books and journal articles and discussed their readings with their colleagues. This process communicates to teachers that they are professionals capable of reading current research and using this research to benefit their practice without the need for an “expert” to explain its significance.

This professional development also occurred concurrently with the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues, Maeroff’s (1988) third element in the empowerment of teachers. He states that “it is no revelation that there is strength in numbers, and, clearly, having a team of teachers involved in trying to produce changes at a school is a more powerful prod than using individual teachers” (Maeroff, 1988, p. 89). Fang et al. (2004) used monthly meetings to empower participating teachers through collaboration. These meetings were attended by the university faculty, teachers, and research staff. They provided opportunities to share successes and challenges concerning the teachers’ instructional practices. The intention was that university faculty could provide additional information in areas that teachers required. The authors found that these meetings, while beneficial, were problematic in the beginning. In the initial meetings, the teachers were passive rather than empowered. “They came to the meeting, expecting either to be judged or to be helped” (Fang et al., 2004, pp. 60–61). This passivity was the result of teachers feeling less capable than the authorities (i.e., university professors) who were present and feeling that the “experts” would provide them with whatever answers they required. This situation was remedied by clarifying that, while the professors might have expertise in the subject area, the teachers had expertise about the students. As a result, the researchers changed the format of the meetings to problem-solving sessions where each teacher
brought samples of work and spoke about a student he or she was struggling to help. The group then worked collaboratively to provide suggestions. This type of meeting embodies the collaboration advocated by Maeroff (1988) and is essential in an RTI framework. RTI requires the involvement of professionals from varying roles such as classroom teachers, special education teachers, administrators, consultants, and school psychologists. As was demonstrated by Fang et al., it can be difficult to create this type of collaborative atmosphere when people from different roles are involved. However, providing teachers with the opportunity to actively participate in meetings and other forms of professional development may allow them ownership of decisions and the sense of power that accompanies this ownership.

For RTI to be implemented in the way it was intended, teachers must be empowered professionals encouraged to make the decisions about their practice that will facilitate student learning; otherwise “they will exercise the only power they have: the veto power that is theirs through noncompliance when they shut the classroom door and close out the world” (Maeroff, 1988, p. 99).

Current Educational Climate in Ontario

The empowerment described by Maeroff (1988) is an important consideration in the current educational climate in Ontario. This study takes place at the end of a decade of unrest in Ontario’s education system. This unrest was the result of a new results-based curriculum, the imposition of externally-developed standardized tests, and the enactment of Bill 160 (Majhanovich, 2002). The new curriculum dictated what students must be able to accomplish by the end of each academic year. The expectations were rigid and based solely on measureable items. The resulting limited flexibility in program planning has to
led to the perspective that this curriculum is “teacher proof” (Majhanovich, 2002, p. 6). This new curriculum was accompanied by the imposition of provincial standardized tests in Grades three, six, nine, and ten that are used to determine if students are meeting expectations. This testing has resulted in the sentiment that these tests were used to evaluate not only students’ learning but also teachers’ teaching (Majhanovich, 2002). The enactment of Bill 160 has added another dimension to these struggles, especially through the removal of principals and vice-principals from the teacher union. This shift served to assign the administration to the role of in-school managers, left to supervise teachers and ensure that their jobs were done according to Ministry expectations, replacing their previous role as fellow educators. It is important to contextualize this study in terms of this bigger picture because this unrest has made the implementation of new initiatives in schools challenging as teachers struggle to assert what little control they feel they have left.

Summary

Providing students with every opportunity to become literate people is an essential part of our education system. It has become increasingly evident that this instruction must begin earlier in order to provide students with the skills they need to be successful in later grades. For some students, this is a challenging feat. The inclusion of early intervention strategies can help these students, who are at-risk for later school failure, to develop necessary reading skills despite these challenges. Responsiveness to intervention provides a model that allows for continuous monitoring of student learning trajectories enabling teachers to provide support as it is needed. However, this model requires a shift in how teachers work; and as such, they must be provided with the support necessary to
implement these changes. We can gain valuable insight into the necessary supports through the professional development literature; however, the complex educational environment in Ontario requires that we delve further. This context has resulted in teachers struggling to assert control over their practice in the face of what they perceive as an increasingly dictatorial education system. The result is the need to ensure that RTI initiatives promote not only the improvement of practice, but also empower teachers to confidently make instructional decisions within their own classrooms based on the data that they gather from students. As such, this study sought to determine, from the perspectives of the teachers involved, the supports and barriers that they experienced and the resulting effects on their levels of empowerment.
CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Current Study’s Place within the Context of a Larger Study

My research was one component of a larger research initiative, piloting an RTI approach to integrative service delivery, carried out by a mid-sized board in southern central Ontario. Ethical clearance for this project was granted by both the school board and Queen’s University. My research focused primarily on literacy outcomes, but consideration was given to the entire classroom context. The five RTI pilot schools were selected through an independent nomination and review process carried out by the district school board. Prior to implementation, these schools were required to have at least 80% staff buy-in in order to be included in the project, and an active primary division learning team. The five control schools were chosen because they matched the pilot schools on three criteria, in this order: sociodemographic markers, school population, and geographic location.

The larger research initiative sought to address the following major research questions: (a) does RTI and progress monitoring lead to increases in literacy achievement (beyond results for usual practice), (b) does this model result in enhanced classroom teacher capacity for providing literacy instruction to all students, (c) is this model deemed to be viable and satisfactory by educators (i.e., consultants, teachers, principals, parents, students), and finally (d) what are the enablers and barriers to bringing the Education for All vision to life in a school district via RTI and progress monitoring? The research team attached to the project sought answers to these questions through several data collection methods. Kindergarten to Grade three students, at both pilot and control schools, were pre- and post-tested using five student outcome measures. Teachers involved in the study
kept implementation logs to track time spent and obstacles encountered. As well, data were gathered from teachers and psychology staff consultants through satisfaction surveys and focus groups. I collected and analyzed the qualitative teacher focus group data, which address two of the above questions, question (b) and question (c) for the teachers only in order to ascertain (a) how teachers describe the supports that were in place to facilitate the implementation of RTI, (b) the barriers that these teachers faced, (c) how teachers describe the impact RTI had on their practice, and, finally, (d) the role of teacher empowerment in the implementation of the RTI model.

Rationale for Qualitative Method

McMillan and Schumacher define qualitative research as “inquiry in which researchers collect data in face-to-face situations by interacting with selected persons in their settings” (2006, p. 315). This interaction allowed me access to teachers’ views about the strengths and weaknesses of the RTI model as experienced in their own classrooms. I chose to use a qualitative case study approach, where the RTI pilot project was the case, as it allowed me to gain a greater understanding of the practical implementation of the RTI model and teachers’ perceptions of its impact on both their classroom practice and their students’ learning.

To gain access to teachers’ perceptions I selected focus groups as the sole data collection method in this study. The use of focus groups allowed teachers to share their experiences in a conversational environment. The resulting discussions between participants enhanced the quality of the data as “participants both quer[ied] each other and explain[ed] themselves to each other” (Morgan, 1996, p. 139). As well, these
conversations allowed for similarities and differences in perspectives to quickly become evident (Patton, 2002).

Sampling Procedure

I used a purposeful sampling approach in my participant selection. This approach allowed for the selection of “information-rich cases” (Patton, 2002, p. 230) which yielded insight into the enacted RTI model. All Kindergarten to Grade three teachers who participated in the RTI pilot program (60 teachers) received a letter of information, from the research department of the school board, inviting them to provide feedback on the RTI project by indicating their willingness to participate in a focus group.

Participation was voluntary and an unwillingness to participate in the focus groups did not jeopardize the teachers’ participation in the RTI project. Because the program was piloted at five elementary schools, one teacher per grade from each school was invited to attend each teacher focus group resulting in a total of four focus groups, one for each grade level that participated in the pilot, Kindergarten to Grade three. The intention was for each of these groups to consist of five teachers, from whom signed letters of consent were received.

Participant Selection

Schools within the pilot opted to determine teacher participation in varying ways. Two schools decided that the principal would select one teacher from each grade, from those who expressed an interest, to participate in the focus groups. Two schools opted to have individual teachers self-nominate by emailing the board contact person, a research assistant who was working on the larger RTI pilot project. The result of this self-nomination process was that some schools did not have teachers from all grades volunteer
to participate. Therefore, representation from these two schools was not consistent across the grade groupings, though each of these schools was represented in at least one focus group. One school declined to participate in the focus groups, sending no representatives from any grade. After teachers were either nominated or indicated their interest in participating, they were invited to the focus group specific to their grade. These individuals were provided with the Queen’s letter of information and consent form once they arrived at the focus group location but before discussions began (Appendix A). The participant selection process resulted in a total of 13 participants. The make-up of the grade specific focus groups is illustrated in Table 3.1.

### Table 3.1: Focus Group Participation by School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
<th>School D</th>
<th>School E</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SK</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 1</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 2</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade 3</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While I acknowledge that five teachers at each grade level created small focus groups, this decision was made to ensure that each teacher had the time to thoroughly describe their experiences working with the RTI model. As Morgan (1998) states: “Having fewer participants gives each one more time to tell personal stories or to express heartfelt opinions. Often, this matches a project goal of getting a more in-depth understanding of what participants have to say” (p. 73). As the goal of this research study was to describe teachers’ perspectives of their participation in the pilot project, the smaller focus groups allowed participants ample time to describe their experiences. As well, I wanted to ensure that teachers working at the same school would not be in a focus
group together. I felt that this approach was warranted because relationship and rank differences often make people cautious about what they say in focus groups (Champion, 2003). As well, pre-existing relationships can impact the functioning of the group. Ensuring that participants do not have prior relationships will ensure that group members speak to the entire group rather than to those people with whom they have a prior relationship thus providing a greater opportunity for the participation of all group members (Flores & Alonso, 1995). Grouping together participants from different schools allowed for their differing experiences to be shared and questioned by fellow participants. The resulting discussions provided participants with the opportunity to question their own level of involvement in the project while commenting on the supports and successes of other participants. This format resulted in collaboration amongst the teachers as they shared ideas and suggestions, which, in turn, provided the researcher with access to the supports that teachers felt were beneficial. These conversations also led some participants to share their frustrations at not having received the same level of support as teachers in other schools. These comments served to inform the researcher about the needs of the participants and about the supports that were considered valuable to the participants. To balance heterogeneity with homogeneity to ensure increased comfort levels (Flores & Alonso, 1995), participants from the same grade attended the same focus group.

Data Collection

The use of focus groups was the sole method of data collection in this study. Each focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes and took place during working hours with release time provided to the teachers involved, ensuring participation as it did not interfere with teachers’ personal time.
These focus groups were facilitated using standardized open-ended questions concerning the success of the RTI model within the participants’ classrooms (Appendix B). That is, the impact on both their teaching and their students’ learning. These questions were created based on information provided by the larger study’s research team. However, many of the teachers were unable to answer several of the questions in the way that they were intended as a result of the problematic implementation of the RTI model within their schools. For example, while RTI is intended to allow students to move fluidly from tier to tier based on regular measurement by classroom teachers, in this particular implementation, the research team assigned each student to a tier after the pre-test data was collected. Those students then remained in that tier for the remainder of the pilot creating a static leveling of the students which is in opposition to the intended RTI model. These types of difficulties caused the participants to answer the questions using the information that was available to them, which in some instances was incorrect. As a result of these challenges, the participants’ useful responses mainly described the implementation of the RTI model rather than the effectiveness of the model in their classrooms.

The focus groups were facilitated by two researchers who were not participating in any other aspect of the pilot project. I moderated the discussion by asking standardized open-ended questions, probing for elaboration in responses, and ensuring that all participants were given opportunities to have their views heard. The role of moderator was discussed beforehand, and it was agreed by all involved that I should assume this role because I am a former classroom teacher who had only recently left the classroom. We felt this would provide participants with a high level of comfort, as research suggests
people often inherently trust a person who is perceived to be a member of their own social organization. This type of trust, which Kramer (1999) calls “category-based” trust, refers to trust predicated on information regarding a trustee’s membership in a social or organizational category—information which, when salient, often unknowingly influences others’ judgments about their trustworthiness…shared membership in a given category can serve as a ‘rule for defining the boundaries of low-risk interpersonal trust that bypasses the need for personal knowledge and the costs of negotiating reciprocity’ when interacting with other members of that category. (Kramer, 1999, p. 577)

As well, I had a greater understanding of the jargon that is often used by teachers than the second researcher, allowing me to probe responses with more specificity. As audio recording was used with the intention of verbatim transcription, the second researcher, a graduate student in clinical psychology with experience working with the RTI model, used a seating chart to take notes to ensure that the speaker could be identified during the transcription phase. As well, the second researcher took notes concerning body language, reactions, and other events of interest that took place during each focus group.

The decision was made not to hold the focus groups at the office of the district school board despite the geographical convenience of this office. Instead, the focus groups took place at a former school that was still owned by the board. The other researcher and I felt this choice would help to ensure that teachers did not feel that we were evaluating their opinions on behalf of the board. We also did not want teachers to feel that their conversations could be overheard by board-level researchers, thus causing them to be cautious in their discussions. The former school was deemed by board researchers to be familiar to many teachers as it was a common site for professional
development workshops thus increasing levels of comfort and allowing us to communicate by our actions that we were interested in learning from the participants and in encouraging them to learn from each other.

Data Analysis

All four focus groups were audio recorded to allow for verbatim transcription. Transcription resulted in 120 pages of focus group data. After transcriptions were complete, I began by open coding (Patton, 2002) one transcript at a time beginning with the Senior Kindergarten group and working my way up through the other grades. As I read a transcript I looked for statements that described teachers’ perspectives of the model. These statements were coded line-by-line to “capture participants’ implied and explicit meanings” (Charmaz, 2002, p. 685). This coding allowed me to group common statements looking for patterns that emerged from the data. I used these patterns to develop categories. This emic approach allowed me to “…represent insiders’ views, such as words, actions, and explanations that are distinctive to the setting or the people” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 372).

Beginning with the Kindergarten focus group, I coded each participant’s statements. As categories began to emerge, these were listed in a separate file. These categories were each assigned a colour and the related statement in the transcript was then highlighted in that colour to facilitate later retrieval of the relevant statements. Within the Kindergarten transcript, 27 codes emerged and these codes were grouped into eight relevant categories. For instance, participants in this focus group made statements about their desire to improve student learning: “If it’s for the kids and it’s going to benefit the
kids, I mean that’s what it’s all about. It’s about helping the children” (K-4, 46). As well, participants made reference to their desire to improve their personal teaching practice: “I’m learning as a new teacher so if it’s going to make my practice better then I want to do it” (K-4, 22). These two codes were grouped together into the category “motivation” as they served to illuminate teachers’ motivations for participating in the project. The participants also made several statements about the sustained use of teaching practices that were in place prior to the project and their continued benefits to student learning: “But you see, I do that (referring to working on letter sounds with small groups) all the time. So that wasn’t RTI that got me into that” (K-1, 9). As well, the participants commented on their knowledge of student achievement levels prior to reading the project’s pre-test data: “I could have told them everything that they told me and more about this kid before I found the results… I think they just need to listen to us when we come out and tell them” (K-1, 20). These two codes in combination with a third code concerning the benefits of the pre-existing assessment tools were sorted into the category “prior professional knowledge.” Throughout data analysis, the method of constant comparison was used to generate codes, categories, and themes (Patton, 2002).

I then repeated this same process with the Grade one, Grade two and Grade three focus groups. While the number of codes differed across the groups, both the Grade one and Grade two groups had all eight categories in common with the Kindergarten Group: motivation, personal teaching improvements, personal teaching challenges, supports provided, supports that were lacking, emotional reactions, and prior professional knowledge. The Grade three group had seven categories in common with the other groups.

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2 Codes are used to identify the grade, the participant, and the page number. For instance, (K-4, 46) means the statement was made in the Kindergarten focus group, by participant number 4, on page 46.
but they did not discuss their emotional reactions to the project and thus that category did not emerge when analyzing the transcript.

The next step was to analyze the categories for themes. Of interest was the contradictory nature of the participants’ statements concerning their levels of participation in the project. For instance, one Kindergarten participant stated: “I’m disappointed in myself that I didn’t do it. I’m disappointed that I didn’t know how to do it” (K-3, 33).

However, another participant in the same focus group shared quite the opposite experience:

She [the special education consultant] showed us the test and she gave us the sheet with her notes saying this is what I did, this is what you’ll find, this is how the kids reacted. So we were actually shown personally by her, which made a huge difference. So then I went back and trained the other senior Kindergarten teachers on how to do that. I have a very different understanding because I was given that knowledge. (K-2, 5)

She later stated: “I’ve seen great changes in their [the students’] letter ID. I have two classes, in my one class nine, who were at tier two and tier three, and they’ve made super gains” (K-2, 9). These contradictory experiences led me to look at the teachers’ individual participation in the project.

On my second pass through the data, I coded each teacher individually looking for statements describing classroom implementation. Eight teachers out of the 13 who were in the focus groups chose to integrate the model in their classrooms. These teachers were categorized as “integrators” as they made statements describing their use of the model in their own classrooms: “The strategies that we got from the website, and after that [from] the consultants, we’ve implemented in our classrooms and given to parents to increase
fluency” (2-1, 2)³; “It is good teaching practice to be taking these running records and be reflecting back on what the child is doing and not doing and then address that with specific strategies” (3-1, 11). Five teachers chose not to implement the model in their classrooms. These teachers were categorized as “islands” due to their statements about the lack of information and support they felt throughout this project:

Quite honestly we haven’t really been doing it at our school because there is no support. It’s very frustrating because I was very excited about this project, I participated last year in the proposal and I’m actually a little bit disappointed because I wish that I was able to better implement it. I really haven’t done much with it at all. (1-2, 2)

Another participant shared a similar experience: “I just feel totally left in the closet” (K-4, 18). The term “islands” was derived from both the participants’ descriptions of being left alone and their resulting decisions to continue to make programming decisions on their own.

Amongst the integrators, 19 codes emerged. These codes were grouped into four categories including the importance of regular meetings, the value of having a lead teacher within the school guiding the implementation of the RTI model, collaboration, and opportunities to increase teacher knowledge. When coding the islands’ participation in the focus groups, 11 codes emerged. These codes were grouped into two categories including: isolation and the lack of information provided. Upon completing the analysis of these two groups, I looked at the schools where participants worked. Until this point in

³ Codes are used to identify the grade, the participant, and the page number. For instance, (2-1, 2) means the statement was made in the Grade two focus group, by participant number 1, on page 2.
the data analysis, this information was segregated from the remainder of the data to ensure that this information would not bias my coding. Looking at this information provided a new depth as all eight integrators worked at two of the pilot schools and all five islands worked at the other two schools. This realization provided valuable insight into the importance of the school environment.

Trustworthiness

I used four strategies to increase the trustworthiness of my study: audio recording, verbatim accounts, multiple focus groups, and a peer debriefer. First, I used audio recording to ensure that both the exact words of the participants and the tone of the conversation were used throughout the data analysis. This recording was done through the use of two digital recorders in case of mechanical malfunction. The audio recording was used in combination with field notes that described body language and who was speaking. The field notes, which were recorded by the second researcher, facilitated my second strategy, which was to ensure that verbatim accounts were used to lessen the possibility of misinterpretation.

I conducted multiple focus groups when gathering the data. The four separate focus groups allowed for triangulation of the data. Multiple passes through each of these four focus groups were made to ensure that coding accurately reflected the positions of the participants. As well, a peer debriefer and I discussed my initial analysis of all four focus groups, “facilitat[ing] the logical analysis of data and interpretation” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 329) and allowing for the recommendation of next steps. This debriefer also posed critical questions throughout my data analysis allowing me an
awareness of my bias and helping me to reevaluate my analysis of the data and to enhance reflexivity. This rigorous coding served to further enhance the trustworthiness of the data.

Summary

Collecting the data through focus groups allowed the perspectives of the teachers who participated in the RTI pilot project to be shared in a conversational style. Through these conversations, teachers’ varying levels of participation in the implementation emerged. The participants’ recognition of these differing levels of implementation resulted in the questioning of each other’s experiences and discussions of the processes that were in place in the differing schools. The use of rigorous data analysis methods further facilitated the decoding of both the explicit and the implicit meanings behind the teachers’ conversations about the supports that were in place and the barriers that they faced. These results are reported in the following two chapters.
CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS OF THE LEVELS OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RTI MODEL

Introduction

In examining the participants’ discussions, two distinct groups unveiled themselves: one group that implemented the model and one group that attempted to implement the model but was not successful. The first group described the implementation within both their individual classrooms and their school as a whole. These descriptions are demonstrated through one participant’s explanation of her experience:

We take a look at the running record of how the kids have done and analyze it and address it. I have maybe six or seven students that I’m monitoring weekly and depending on what evidence I have on what they’re reading, what their weaknesses are, I may change my strategy from week to week. And we have a record sheet that we’ve been keeping. (3-1, 4)

As a result of the integration of the RTI model into their classrooms, I categorized these teachers as “integrators.” The second group described quite a different experience, they didn’t feel able to implement the model. These participants described their confusion in the face of the model and the resulting limited implementation within their individual classrooms and schools as a whole. As one participant explained: “I sort of feel like I’m working in the dark” (2-3, 6). Later in the discussion she further described her disconnection from the pilot project: “You’re sort of in your own little world in there and you’re consumed with what you have to do” (2-3, 18). As a result of the participants’
common descriptions of their feelings of segregation from the pilot, I categorized the second group of teachers as “islands.”

In this chapter, I describe the experiences of both of these groups of teachers. The description of the integrators focuses on the elements that contributed to their successful implementation of the beginning phases of the responsiveness to intervention model in their individual classrooms and the role their school colleagues played in their success. I then describe the experiences of the islands, describing the barriers that they faced during their experience.

**Integrators**

There were eight participants labeled as integrators in this project, and all eight were working at two of the five pilot schools. The significance of the school groupings was evident as the majority of the participants’ discussions concerning the success of the model described the school-wide conditions in which they were working. From the descriptions of these participants, four supports were detected that contributed to the successful implementation of the RTI model in their schools: regular meetings, a lead teacher, collaboration, and opportunities to increase teacher knowledge. These supports are described below.

**Meetings**

Teachers in the two schools that integrated the model described meeting regularly as a primary division to discuss the implementation: “We’ve been meeting monthly with our RTI team; the special ed consultant, speech and language, the psychologist, and all of the primary team is released for the morning and our principal” (2-2, 2-3). Responses indicated that one of the positive aspects of these meetings was the consistent
dissemination of information: “At the meetings we were all given the same information and we all just did it” (K-2, 46). This consistency provided teachers with a clear picture of the expectations, thus allowing them to implement the requisite elements into their classrooms. However, regular meetings alone were not sufficient. These meetings required purposeful discussion of the model. They needed to be really laid out specifically because at some of these meetings it has been a total waste of time and I would much rather be in the classroom teaching and applying those strategies that I know my twos and threes need. (3-1, 11)

Teachers described finding these meetings most purposeful when they provided information that would directly support their classroom practice:

Would it be worthwhile if we left there every time with a handful of things to implement in our classrooms? Yeah then it would be worthwhile to be pulled out if the next week we know we’re going to come back and just boom, boom, boom, we’re doing this and this and this with the kids. (1-3, 22)

With the organization required to plan regularly scheduled and purposeful meetings, the participants in both schools described the importance of a lead teacher who would assume responsibility for this planning.

**Lead Teacher**

Participants in these two schools consistently described a lead teacher who spearheaded the implementation through ensuring both that the pilot was well organized and that a positive atmosphere was maintained. The lead teacher took care of scheduling the meetings:
The LRT [Literacy Resource Teacher] would organize the first meeting and became chair of the committee. The consultants were all there with their daybooks and we planned the rest of the meetings to last us until the end of the year. (3-3, 11)

These meetings were essential to the sharing of necessary information. Ensuring that they occurred regularly allowed for the continued dissemination of information and for questions and concerns to be addressed. The scheduling of regular meetings was facilitated by the lead teacher who took responsibility for the agendas of these meetings ensuring that they met the needs of the teachers: “She listens in our primary division meetings, listens to questions and concerns, and tries to base our agenda on that” (1-1, 20).

While ensuring regular and productive communication was a key element in the role of the lead teacher, many described another, more motivational, role. In the face of the implementation of a new model, teachers faced various challenges and frustrations. The lead teachers accepted these challenges and strove to ensure that the team was reminded of the positive contributions that this model could make for students and teachers:

It’s very easy to be negative and get frustrated when we’re bombarded with a lot, she did say it’s a pilot project…she said we would not have that program [Reading Mastery] without the RTI pilot in our school. I have a little guy who probably wouldn’t be seen as much as he is. It just has drawn a lot of attention back to that we need to look at these kids when they’re younger so I mean that’s one of the positive things. I think it’s got our focus back on that. (1-3, 7)
In maintaining a positive and organized atmosphere, the lead teacher contributed to the success of the pilot’s implementation and helped provide the opportunity for collaboration. This collaboration served as another essential element in the successful implementation of the RTI model.

Collaboration

Evidence that collaboration contributed to the successful implementation of the RTI model took two forms: the language used by the participants as well as their descriptions of the discussions that took place throughout the pilot. When listening to the language used by the participants, there was a distinct difference between the word choice of the “integrators” and the “islands.” When listening to the integrators, the word “we” permeated their descriptions. The use of “we” was one manner in which they demonstrated the collaborative approach that their schools took to the pilot. Participant K-2 exemplifies the consistent use of the first person plural in the following quotation: “We didn’t want all those kids in that spot so we were like okay what can we do to get to these kids” (K-2, 9). In these schools, both problems and successes were frequently attributed to the team effort. These open discussions collaboratively addressed the analysis of data, student learning, goal setting, instructional decision making, and problem solving, thus allowing teachers to actively participate in all aspects of the pilot’s implementation at their school. Examples of these discussions are presented below.

Upon completion of student pre-testing, preliminary results were presented to the teachers. Weekly progress monitoring data were then gathered by teachers for students who were deemed to be at-risk. This type of data was unfamiliar to teachers, who were not accustomed to using a fluency test to assess student achievement: “I still questioned it
at some of the meetings we had. I couldn’t get through my head the fluency part of it. Why time these kids?” (K-1, 5). The data were also calculated using a words-per-minute formula, which was a new calculation method for the teachers in this pilot: “I’m having trouble with calculating the score when they are below a minute. There’s a formula which I’m not great at” (K-1, 29). The collaborative atmosphere allowed teachers to openly describe these challenges. As a result, they were provided with the type of support that was necessary to help them successfully complete the weekly progress monitoring:

She [the special education consultant] showed us how she did the test and she gave us the sheet with her notes saying this is what I did, this is what you’ll find, this is how the kids reacted. So we were actually shown personally by her which made a huge difference. (K-2, 5)

This type of direct instruction provided teachers not only with the knowledge necessary to complete the testing, but also with a greater understanding of the information derived from the data concerning their students’ abilities: “We didn’t want all those kids in that spot so we were like okay what can we do to get these kids more fluent with their letter sounds” (K-2, 9-10). This knowledge resulted in the setting of collaborative goals addressing the needs of at-risk students: “We as a group decided we would concentrate on the level two kids because we wanted to get the other kids to be reading that benchmark at the end of the year” (K-1, 43). Setting these goals as a team also resulted in collaborative instructional decision making, as groups of teachers tried to determine how best to improve the learning of their students: “As Kindergarten teachers we all jumped in and worked really hard on letter ID” (K-2, 10). In attempting to address the needs within their schools, the participants encountered several challenges. However, the collaborative
atmosphere that they created allowed them to design and implement creative solutions to their problems:

In Grade one, we’ve had one of our teachers, who has the highest number of high needs children in her classroom, she went to the training [for Reading Mastery] and so she’s actually going to use it in place of her guided reading with those students…and then the rest of us Grade one teachers are going to take the remainder of her class for the time that she’s doing that, a 40 minute period, and insert them into our literacy centre groups. (1-1, 3)

While teachers from both schools described their participation in in-school collaborative instructional decision-making, one conversation between two Grade three teachers served to demonstrate the potential benefits of cross-school collaboration. One of the schools selected a common instructional strategy that was to be implemented across same grade classrooms for a six-week period. The success of this strategy was tracked through the weekly progress monitoring:

Our school wanted to have a strategy for the grade team to focus on…you pick a strategy and you try it out for six weeks and you see if it’s worked or not and then you go on to a brand new strategy. (3-3, 4)

However, the imposition of instructional strategies for all same-grade students seemed to result in some frustrations amongst the teachers at that school. The perception that these were imposed strategies rather than teacher selected strategies resulted in teachers removing themselves from the decision making: “We’re saying we need something maybe more laid out specifically…We need resources that give us the strategies laid out for us and how we can incorporate them. That’s where our school’s at” (3-3, 4).
The other school of integrators took an alternative, more child-centered approach, using different instructional strategies determined by individual student needs:

We take a look at the running record of how the kids have done and analyze it and address it. So I have maybe six or seven students that I’m monitoring weekly and depending on what evidence I have on what they’re reading and what their weaknesses are, I may change my strategy from week to week. We have a record sheet that we’ve been keeping, it has got the date, the information, and the strategy. (3-1, 4)

Upon hearing this alternate approach, the participant from the first integrator school shared her belief that this method better differentiated instruction, thus potentially enabling greater gains in student achievement: “It just reminds me that you’re probably differentiating for them and that’s what they need…you’re doing it based on the individual needs of the kids” (3-3, 15). This conversation served to illuminate the potential benefits to teacher knowledge through cross-school collaborations. Another participant also described the emotional benefits of cross-school collaborations: “seeing from the other schools, okay everybody’s feeling the same way…because it validates that okay it isn’t just our school” (1-3, 23-24). This realization resulted in an increased sense of comfort amongst the teachers through the knowledge that everybody struggles, even when they’re on the right track.

Opportunities to Increase Teacher Knowledge

The collaborative environment described by the participants not only facilitated an increase in teacher knowledge but it also guided the methods through which this knowledge was gained. At the beginning of the pilot, the teachers at the two successful
schools were provided with explicit instruction by the board consultant teams working at their schools. The topics of this instruction were determined by the research team responsible for organizing the pilot project. However, as the RTI implementation progressed, some teachers began to take ownership of their success and started to request instruction in areas that they felt would best support their ability to implement the model. The participants’ self-selected instruction was provided by both the consultants and the teachers themselves depending on the topic being addressed and the expertise of the people on the RTI team.

Initially, teachers required explicit instruction of the elements of the RTI model as they were unfamiliar with both its overall framework and the specific assessment tools. Much of this information was presented at a pilot-wide meeting several months before the pilot project began. Teachers from all five schools who participated in the pilot project were in attendance along with the consultants who worked with each of these schools. This meeting was facilitated by the research team who was consulting on and conducting this study. In the focus groups, the participants shared the sentiment that the meeting had been informative: “Definitely you…got a lot more information” (K-2, 4). However, the time that elapsed between this initial meeting and the practical implementation of the pilot in the schools was problematic:

We should have…learned all about it in September and then bang, before the end of October our baseline data should have been gathered and then by November we start the probes but starting the probes in the end of March it was just very late. (3-1, 12)
As a result of this delay, a school-specific meeting re-explaining the expectations of the pilot was conducted in the two successful schools: “Our learning resource teacher gave us a chart and she said every week you’re monitoring and you record the results” (K-2, 6).

As discussed in the previous section, teachers had some difficulty understanding the pre-test data that were shared at the beginning of the pilot. In response to these challenges, experts were brought in to the two schools to explain to teachers the significance of the data. This consultation was necessary for teachers to use these data to guide their instruction: “Not everybody is a data person and it didn’t come with an explanation so we had our psych person come in to sit with us and talk about what it was and how to read the data” (1-1, 5). This instruction provided an increased comfort level and allowed participants to determine which students required progress monitoring, according to the pre-test data, and to begin the weekly testing. However, once teachers began the progress monitoring, new questions arose. For instance, the teachers were still uncertain about the use of a fluency test as the measure of student achievement. Until this pilot, the participants had been instructed to use the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) with a focus on comprehension as opposed to fluency. This discrepancy caused some discomfort for the teachers: “I couldn’t get through my head the fluency part of it. Why time these kids?” (K-1, p. 5). As a result of this type of questioning, professional development was provided in this area in the two schools where teachers felt supported: “We did have in-servicing from our speech pathologist who explained why fluency was so important” (K-2, 10).

While the testing procedures and data analysis required explanations from professionals with expertise in these areas, instruction was also provided by classroom
teachers. When seeking increased knowledge in practical instructional strategies, the teachers turned to their colleagues with expertise in these areas:

We have a lot of ESL children, and we feel that a lot of the fluency and vocabulary issues are due to ESL. We think that’s one of the reasons that the kids aren’t developing fluency. So we developed some web resources that parents and teachers can refer to. We did that with our ELL [English Language Learner] teacher. (2-1, 4)

Not only did teachers turn to each other when they required information but also to share in the challenge of developing new classroom resources. As participant 1-1 describes, her team decided to use some of the release time available to create resources that could be used by all members of the team: “We have a certain amount of release time left so a couple of teachers are going to be released and we’ve decided to use it for make and takes4” (1-1, 17).

Throughout the focus groups, the integrators described collaborative environments, where information was shared and active participation was welcomed. The islands described a dramatically different experience fraught with isolation and a lack of information.

Islands

There were five participants labeled as islands in this project, and all five were working at two of the five pilot schools. Once again, the significance of the school groupings was clear because none of the participants from these two schools implemented

4 “Make and takes” is a term used by teachers to describe hands-on resources that can be used in the classroom. The teachers in this pilot provided examples such as flash cards, instruction cards for activities, etc.
the responsiveness to intervention model. These participants described two barriers to the implementation of RTI in their classrooms and in their school as a whole: isolation and a lack of information. These barriers are described below.

**Isolation**

The group of participants who were categorized as islands commonly described a sense of isolation throughout the pilot. These descriptions took two forms: explicit statements and word choice. The islands made explicit statements that described the abandonment that they felt as they tried to implement the responsiveness to intervention model in their classrooms: “We had just that initial one [meeting] where they just gave us the data and we haven’t seen anybody since” (1-2, 14); “I just felt totally left in a closet” (K-4, 18). This isolation was also shared through their word selection throughout the focus groups, especially the prevalent use of the word “I.” This word choice further demonstrated the sentiment that this project was the sole responsibility of the classroom teacher: “There’s one person being spread out so thinly. There’s so many demands and it’s always the teacher’s responsibility” (K-3, 19). When discussing the lack of implementation in their own classrooms, the use of the first person singular further reflected the individual sense of responsibility that the teachers felt in the face of this project: “I’m actually a little bit disappointed because I wish that I was able to better implement it. I really haven’t done much with it at all [sigh]” (1-2, 2); “That just went to the bottom of the list. It’s just one of those things that didn’t get done, and am I disappointed? I am disappointed in myself that I didn’t do it” (K-3, 32-33). While the participants attributed some of the responsibility for the lack of implementation to themselves, this same participant goes on to describe a further barrier, the lack of
information that was provided to the teachers: “I’m disappointed that I didn’t know how to do it” (K-3, 33).

Lack of Information

This feeling of isolation, combined with a lack of the necessary information, resulted in an unsuccessful implementation of the RTI model at the schools at which the islands worked: “Quite honestly we haven’t been doing it at our school because there is no support” (1-2, 2). This lack of information began with the pre-testing.

I think part of the problem was that we didn’t even see what they were tested on. The kids were taken away…whatever they did, they did. And they brought them back and there was no feedback, nothing and I thought what are they doing? … Well the feedback came but all it was, was a few names that were at the tier two or tier three level. I wasn’t shown the test. I didn’t know what they were doing. (K-3, 3).

This statement demonstrates the frequently described frustration at not having a full understanding of what the students were being tested on and what those testing results truly meant to the teachers’ practice. This frustration made one of the key goals of RTI, making instructional decisions based on student data, quite difficult to buy into. As a result, the islands were unwilling to invest the time in using the progress monitoring tool: “It’s just unrealistic to use that much time when we don’t even really know what we’re doing and then after we collect the data we don’t know what we’re supposed to do with it” (1-2, 4).

Along with further information about the testing results, the islands described the need for more information concerning the testing procedures: “I didn’t know how to do it.
I didn’t understand it… and even though it may be very simple, you still need to be shown” (K-3, 27). Another participant further illustrates this point by relating teacher instruction to the instruction of students:

It’s like anything. If you don’t show your kids how to use a centre, they’re not going to go to that centre because they don’t know what to do when they get there…You can set up a beautiful activity centre but if you don’t show the kids and walk them through and show them how to do it, it will just sit there idle. (K-4, 27)

This anecdote serves to illustrate the need for explicit instruction in the methods of both gathering and interpreting data.

The lack of information and feeling of isolation resulted in the participants from both of these schools prioritizing other initiatives and school needs over RTI: “If you leave schools alone, like really alone, what’s going to get done? Because everything else takes precedence over this thing that’s sitting on my desk right now, everything else” (K-3, 14).

Summary

In the focus group discussions, two groups of teachers emerged: those who successfully implemented the initial phases of the responsiveness to intervention model and those who did not. The integrators described four supports that contributed to their implementation: monthly school meetings, an organized and motivational lead teacher, regular opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, and opportunities to increase their knowledge bases concerning the new practices required by the model. These four supports served to reveal the significance of the school environment in which the
successful participants worked. The importance of this support structure was further reinforced by the islands whose lack of support within their school environment resulted in a limited and, as such, unsuccessful implementation of the model. While these two groups differed greatly in their implementations, there were similarities in the stories that they shared concerning both their motivations for participating in, and the frustrations involved in, this initiative.
CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS OF TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES OF THEIR 
PARTICIPATION IN THE PILOT

Introduction

The participants in this research project differed in their levels of implementation of the responsiveness to intervention model. This variation is reflected in the teachers’ views regarding the success of the pilot’s implementation. However, common themes ran through the stories that all of the teachers, both integrators and islands, shared in the focus groups. The participants shared similar motivations for participating in the project as well as similar frustrations concerning the lack of acknowledgment of their professional practice. These commonalities are explored in this chapter.

Shared Motivations

The participants, both integrators and islands, expressed similar motivations for participating in the pilot project. The first of these motivations was the desire to improve their own practice: “If it’s going to make my practice better, then I want to do it” (K-4, 22). This desire was most often discussed in conjunction with the desire to improve student learning:

We have a huge group in primary, 10 teachers that are super dedicated and always looking for the next new thing to do with their students to get them to the next level and we really thought that would come out of this. (1-1, 2)

The teachers believed that the responsiveness to intervention model could provide the type of support they felt their students needed: “I remember that first meeting we went to…what really triggered me is that I remember them saying statistics about the kids’
improvement and I was like wow, maybe this is really going to be something” (1-3, 13). As described by this teacher, it was the belief that this model could have a positive impact on their students’ learning that motivated the teachers to participate in the RTI pilot project. However, while the statistics representing student achievement in prior RTI implementations shared by the research team in the initial meeting were motivating, the pilot’s singular method of data collection soon resulted in frustration for the participants.

Shared Frustrations

Knowledge of Student Abilities

The teachers’ first tangible exposure to the responsiveness to intervention model involved a baseline assessment of their students’ reading abilities. The pilot project relied on a curriculum-based measurement (CBM) tool to measure student learning trajectories. This fluency-based tool consisted of letter sound identification in Kindergarten, word identification in Grade one, and passage reading in Grades two and three. The students’ scores were measured according to how many letter sounds or words they accurately identified in one minute. While this tool has proven to be effective in previous empirical research (e.g., Simmons et al., 2008), this method of evaluation differed from the tools that the teachers had used in the past. Although this change required a shift in the teachers’ thinking about how their students’ abilities were measured, with the proper information, the teachers began to accept the use of the fluency measure as a tool for progress monitoring. So while this shift did result in some initial frustrations, these frustrations were not a significant barrier for teachers who received the proper support. However, introducing the model in such a way, while perhaps necessary for pilot evaluation, conveyed a different message to the teachers. This aspect was interpreted by
teachers as a questioning of their abilities. All of the teachers in this study shared the perspective that their existing work and evaluations of their own students went unacknowledged. This lack of acknowledgment proved to be a substantial source of frustration: “I could have told them everything that they told me and more about this kid before I found the results...just listen to us and go ahead and help us” (K-1, 20). This comment was preceded by a description of this teacher’s personal assessment tool, which closely resembled the progress monitoring tool used in this pilot:

This particular one here [referring to personal assessment tool] is my own testing sheet which I’ve used for years and years and years. The line through it, the letters, means they know the sound. This was in place before they did the RTI. (K-1, 10)

This lack of recognition for the teachers’ existing practices, practices which so closely resembled the progress monitoring tool, resulted in the teachers’ frustration that their data collection methods were not considered an adequate measurement of student ability. Only the pre-test data gathered by the research team was used to determine the students who were at-risk, and not the recommendations of the teachers.

While the questioning of their personal evaluation tools was frustrating, it was the teachers’ perceptions that their ability to assess their own students was being questioned that resulted in the greatest emotional reactions: “That was almost insulting as a teacher. That’s our job, to know these kids. We could have told them these are the kids we need to target” (1-3, 6). This emotional response to the project was not only present when teachers discussed their role in the evaluation of their students but also when they discussed their personal professional practice.
Prior Professional Practice

While pre-test data were gathered from the students to ensure that the participants knew their students’ existing abilities and could build upon these skills, no such data were gathered from the teachers. The teachers stated that they were not consulted about the types of instructional strategies that they were implementing prior to beginning the pilot. As such, the teachers perceived that their existing abilities were not considered when designing the pilot project and determining what information needed to be shared with teachers. This lack of consultation led participants to question whether this model was intended to replace or complement their existing practice. As a result, the participants expressed frustration that rather than a means for helping their students succeed, RTI was instead calling into question their abilities as professionals. Many teachers thus felt the need to defend their existing practice and attribute student success to their existing program regardless of the inclusion of RTI measures.

As with the assessment tool that participant K-1 described in the previous section, many aspects of the RTI model were mirrored in the teachers’ existing practice:

I haven’t implemented anything different than I would have done in my program. I do a running record other than DRA [Developmental Reading Assessment] through the month with the kids that I feel are at-risk or demonstrated that they could be at-risk so I haven’t done anything new. (3-1, 2)

As a result, many of the teachers attributed the successes of their students to their own practice and in turn questioned the benefits of the RTI model:

Their scores have all increased. I think not because of the RTI but because of what we’re doing in literacy centres every day, guided reading every day, reading for fluency, working in their journals, working with their little dictionaries, getting
words off the word wall...so I have seen an increase but it’s probably the things that were already in place. (2-3, 11–12)

This sentiment was echoed by a participant who teaches Grade one: “When these children grow, this is probably the growth I’d expect anyways in a regular year and a lot of these things I would do anyways” (1-3, 2). While the participants questioned the value of RTI, what was more telling was their questioning of the respect that was held for them and their existing programs: “But these are the things we do day in, day out so...just allowing us the credibility that we do these things” (1-3, 4). The resources that were given to the participants served to further alienate the teachers involved, as they contained photocopies of many of the Ministry of Education resources that are mandated for use in classrooms:

Some of the books that we were given are just photocopies from Ministry documents that we already have…I looked through this and I thought wait a second, it was a photocopied page of Education for All and then a photocopied page of Effective Reading and Writing for Primary and I kept reading and I go what the heck is going on here…I was insulted frankly. This is not a professional resource. (3-1, 16)

This lack of acknowledgment that the teachers were already teaching their students using the recommended strategies served to evoke strong emotions from the participants, both the integrators and the islands. These emotions led the teachers to question the value of the responsiveness to intervention model and their participation in the pilot. This lack of acknowledgment drove one participant to declare that teachers had no power in determining board initiatives: “That tells me that it doesn’t matter what I say.
You don’t trust my judgment at all. You’re putting this program in whether I like it or not. That’s what that told me” (K-1, 39).

Accompanying the participants’ perspectives, that their existing teaching practices were not acknowledged, was the difficulty that teachers faced when attempting to address both the RTI model and the existing initiatives and resulting assessment tools that were in place in their schools. The contradictory elements of these differing initiatives caused challenges when teachers tried to integrate them in their classrooms:

We’ve had a few discussions about this, that in a way some of it felt like conflicting information because with our literacy improvement teachers and with the Ministry coming in and some of the other schools being OFIP [Ontario Focused Intervention Partnership] schools our main focus last year and this year has been on comprehension strategies and then we felt this year when RTI came in, it was on fluency and decoding and we were just having trouble figuring out where to, where to balance that out and to fit that into the day. (3-3, 10)

Teachers felt that this lack of coherence between the pilot project and Ministry initiatives not only affected their ability to design a cohesive instructional program, but also had an impact on their schedules: “You have a third of your class that you’re supposed to be monitoring, on top of all the other assessments, when you’re supposed to be teaching” (1-2, 19). The perception that RTI was additional work was not the only concern that participants voiced about the assessment tool that was used in the pilot. Participants described concern that this brief assessment should not be the sole determinant in identifying students who are at-risk: “I just don’t think that [the progress monitoring tool] should be the sole determiner of who’s getting intervention. I think that it’s one piece of it” (1-2, 10). They also expressed a belief that the Developmental
Reading Assessment, the assessment tool that is mandated in their board, helped to guide their instruction in a way that the progress monitoring tool could not:

Focus for us in the last few years has been [on] doing daily running records and the miscue analysis. If you’re really looking at those miscues then it is telling you about where you need to focus your instruction with them. (1-2, 9)

In the face of all these challenges, the participants valued the opportunity to share their views on the success of the model within the focus groups: “We’re happy to have a forum for our thoughts because that’s something that’s valuable too” (1-1, 23). However, some also expressed concern over how their commentary would be viewed by others. They were concerned that, in our current educational climate, their comments would be viewed as complaints rather than as an attempt to ameliorate the situation:

I think I just want people to know that as teachers we’re getting a bad rap these days for always seeming like we’re complaining and moaning and groaning. We really are out for the best interest of our kids. And when we’re presented with something like this and then we’re put back into that role of having to seem like we’re not enthusiastic and we’re not willing to go above and beyond…I just don’t want to perpetuate that myth of what’s happening out there, that teachers want to get in at nine, leave at three and have their summers off. And that anything that is brought to them is going to be “oh more work…” If there’s something valuable brought that will help our kids, I think everyone can say that’s what we’re all about. We don’t want that negativity to be seen in the wrong light, that we’re not out to help our kids. (1-3, 23)

This teacher expresses the teachers’ motivations both for participating in new initiatives and for discussing the challenges faced during implementations. They want
what is best for their students, that is, the time and opportunity to teach using the most effective strategies. Questioning the merits of this model served to demonstrate not their reluctance to participate but rather their desire to ensure that they are making the best decisions for their students.

Summary

The teachers’ commonly stated motivation for participating in the responsiveness to intervention pilot project was to improve their own practice, in turn, improving the learning of their students. However, their ability to accomplish this goal was diminished by their perceptions that their existing practices were being questioned. The role that this perceived deprofessionalization played in the implementation of the RTI model is discussed in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION

In his 2003 work, Guskey described six common goals of professional development: (a) the enhancement of teacher knowledge, (b) the provision of sufficient time to deepen teachers’ understanding, (c) the opportunity for collaborative exchange with clear goals for improving student learning, (d) the inclusion of evaluation procedures, (e) the alignment of professional development efforts with other reform initiatives, and (f) that decision making should occur with the support of both the site-based personnel and the district level personnel. The data that emerged from this study support the importance of these goals in the context of responsiveness to intervention (RTI) implementation. However, another significant goal emerged from the data, the goal of empowering teachers to become confident decision makers in their professional practice. I posit that this seventh dimension would not only support RTI implementation but would also promote the sustainability of the model in classrooms.

As the schools involved in this study were in the beginning phases of implementing the RTI model, the participants experienced only a small part of RTI. The teachers were primarily focused on the implementation of progress monitoring in their classrooms. That being said, the data do provide an opportunity to explore the supports that were beneficial to the implementation and the barriers that impeded its success.

Sitting in the focus groups and listening to the teachers, it was immediately obvious that some teachers had implemented the RTI model in their classrooms, while others had not. A potential cause of this discrepancy only emerged through further analysis of the data. Once I had coded participants’ statements to determine who was an integrator and who was an island, I looked at the names of the schools where these
participants worked. The fact that all eight participants who implemented the model came from one of two schools, while all five of the participants whose implementation was unsuccessful worked at one of two different schools, led to an analysis of the school effects on implementation. These data elucidate the importance of school environment on the successful implementation of this model. What was it that allowed two sets of schools participating in the same pilot to have such differing experiences? By drawing on Guskey’s (2003) theory, I was able to address this question.

Descriptions of the implementation procedures that relate to Guskey’s (2003) first four goals were found throughout the discussions of the participants from the two schools in which the implementation of the model was successful. While the first three of these goals are conceptually different, the participants’ responses reveal that they are, in fact, interconnected. All three goals were accomplished through the inclusion of monthly meetings over the second half of one academic year. These meetings provided the opportunity for instruction that increased teacher knowledge. The continuation of these meetings throughout the pilot provided the teachers with sufficient time to begin to deepen their understanding of the model. As well, these meetings were conducted in an atmosphere of collegiality where collaboration was encouraged and valued.

This sense of collegiality was apparent in the language selections of the participants from the two differing sets of schools. The integrators used the first person pronoun plural (“we”) regularly throughout the focus groups, attributing both the successes and challenges to the RTI team within their schools. This perception of shared responsibilities allowed them to communicate challenges without admitting personal weakness, providing a sense of security. The islands used the first person singular (“I”), attributing the lack of implementation to themselves and the research team who, from the
islands’ perspectives, failed to provide them with the support necessary for a successful implementation. They spoke about themselves negatively sharing their disappointments in themselves. When speaking of the research team, they were accusatory. This language choice communicates the importance of collegiality to the participants. Those participants who were part of a school-based team did not feel the need to speak negatively about themselves when challenges arose. Instead they described these challenges in terms of what their teams were doing to address the issues or in terms of what they needed from the research team to ensure their continued success. This sense of belonging allowed them to comfortably share challenges without the fear of judgment.

While the teachers’ choice of wording provided valuable data, so too did the teachers’ descriptions of what occurred during their monthly meetings. They described the enhancement of their knowledge base through the provision of school-based instruction that addressed both the significance of the fluency-based progress monitoring tool and the implementation of this tool in the classrooms. This instruction served to increase the teachers’ comfort level with the use of this new and unfamiliar assessment method. As a result of their increased understanding of the tool, the participants described regular use of progress monitoring in their classrooms.

Guskey’s second goal, providing structured and purposeful time to deepen teachers’ understanding, was also reflected by their participation in the monthly meetings. The teachers at the two successful schools in this pilot attended a year’s worth of monthly meetings at which they were given the time to discuss the positive aspects of the model and the challenges they were facing. These discussions also served to demonstrate the inclusion of Guskey’s third goal, the opportunity for collaborative exchange with clear goals for improving student learning. During the focus groups, the participants described
opportunities to problem solve and make decisions collaboratively during these regular meetings. Gathering together in such a regular manner also provided the teachers with the opportunity to participate in the evaluation procedures described in Guskey’s fourth goal. It is important that this aspect of the meetings be maintained to ensure the continued evaluation of the model in order to promote the continual betterment of its implementation.

Addressing these four goals allowed for the successful implementation of the initial phases of the RTI model. However, the failure to align the RTI model with other initiatives, Guskey’s fifth goal, caused a significant barrier for the teachers, even within the successful schools. The fluency tool that was used for progress monitoring in the study appeared to be at odds with the emphasis on comprehension, that was advocated through Ministry professional development and the board mandated assessment tool, the Developmental Reading Assessment; this mismatch resulted in difficulty integrating these initiatives in the classroom. As a result, teachers expressed frustration with the time that it took to complete all the paperwork involved. But more importantly, the teachers described the challenge of designing a program that adequately addressed the needs of the whole class, the students who were at-risk, and the integration of Ministry expectations with the expectations of the RTI model. These challenges provide evidence of the lack of coherence between the current Ministry initiatives and the RTI model. This struggle, which was faced by the teachers who were successfully implementing the RTI model, calls into question the sustainability of the implementation. If teachers feel that RTI is interfering with their ability to effectively educate their students, the likelihood that they will continue to implement the model is limited. For these reasons, it is essential to ensure that future implementations consider the existing Ministry and board initiatives. That is,
we must consider the existing responsibilities of classroom teachers and determine how best to ensure that there is coherence between teachers’ existing roles and the added responsibilities required by the RTI model.

Determining whether or not the pilot truly addressed Guskey’s sixth common goal, the making of decisions with the support of both the site-based personnel and the district level personnel, is a complicated task. On the one hand, the schools self-nominated into the program and were required to have at least an 80% staff buy-in in order to participate in the pilot. This requirement seems to indicate that, in fact, the school (i.e. site, in Guskey’s vernacular) personnel were part of the decision to implement RTI in their schools. On the other hand, many of the participants’ responses during the focus groups indicated a belief that their opinions were not valued, that they felt the model was going to be implemented regardless of their assessment of its viability. This contradiction led me to question what caused the shift in teachers’ perspectives from optional to obligatory participation.

Based on my data, the teachers’ initial support of the RTI model stemmed from their perception that this model would improve both their practice and their students’ learning. However, the reality of the implementation did not meet their expectations. The teachers’ perspectives that the school board’s singular focus was data collection through the fluency measure served as a frustration to the teachers. They described feeling that the complex instructional practices required in a classroom were not considered in the pilot’s design, nor was the model integrated with their existing practice. So while teachers may have been involved in the decision to pilot RTI at their school and in their classrooms, they were not consulted about the methods through which this model would be implemented. It is clear that school personnel’s initial nominal support of the decision to
pilot a new model is not sufficient to promote ongoing support of a model. Instead, teachers must also be involved in decisions about the structure of the model and how it will be integrated within their existing classroom practice.

To examine the teachers’ perspectives of their perceived limited role in the decision making concerning the RTI model’s implementation, we must explore their understanding of and belief in the assessment procedures that were utilized. An essential element of a teacher’s practice is the assessment of his or her students. The participants in this study clearly stated their belief that it is the teacher’s responsibility to know the ability levels of all of their students and to design their instruction accordingly. In theory, the RTI model complements this belief by emphasizing the importance of assessment through the frequent collection of data for students who are at-risk. In this pilot, the identification of students who were at-risk was determined by the research team based solely on the fluency pre-test data. This decision contributed to the teachers’ perspectives that their professional judgment concerning their students’ learning abilities was not valued. The teachers’ lack of involvement in the identification process is particularly troublesome in an RTI model, where teachers are required to gather frequent data from students who are at-risk and use these data to make informed instructional decisions to improve student learning trajectories. Maeroff (1988) provides a lens through which we can examine the barriers that were constructed by the research team when they made the decision to base student identification exclusively on pre-test data.

Maeroff (1988) described empowerment as “the power to exercise one’s craft with confidence and to help shape the way the job is done” (p. 4). The teachers in this pilot shared their perspective that their assessments of their students, based on existing assessment tools, went unacknowledged. The decision to exclude the teachers’ existing
knowledge of student achievement levels communicated to teachers, whether inadvertently or not, that they had limited ability to assess their own students. As a result, the teachers’ ability to trust the data that they gathered was inhibited, which in turn interfered with their ability to confidently make decisions about instructional programming. To implement the RTI model, teachers must feel empowered to make these instructional decisions based on the data that they gather through the use of regular progress monitoring. The alignment of the results of the researchers’ pre-test data with the teachers’ assessments of their students’ abilities was a missed opportunity to foster this sense of empowerment. The consistency of the researchers’ and teachers’ assessments could have been used to validate, to teachers, the use of the fluency tool in the classroom rather than undermine the teachers’ personal assessments of their students’ learning abilities.

Providing teachers with the necessary instruction to promote their confidence in the use of new assessment tools and integrating their existing assessment practices with the progress monitoring tool are important elements of the implementation of the RTI model. However, respecting teachers’ existing practice is another key element in promoting RTI’s inclusion in the classroom. In this study, the teachers perceived RTI as both an addition to and a criticism of their existing programs.

The teachers in this study shared their perspectives that this implementation of the RTI model called into question their abilities as professionals. As such, they felt the need to defend their existing practice. This defensive positioning resulted in an atmosphere of confrontation rather than collaboration between the board-level research team and the participants. In turn, the teachers, even those who had successfully implemented progress monitoring in their classrooms, clung to their existing practices trying to prove the
benefits of the programs that many of the participants had spent years developing. As a classroom teacher, I can attest to the plethora of hours that are invested in designing and redesigning a literacy program that you feel will support the learning of all the students in your class. Implementers need to be cognizant and respectful of this investment. In this particular study, this investment was not acknowledged which resulted in an oppositional environment that further contradicted the type of empowering professional development model described by Maeroff (1988). By devaluing the existing practice of the teachers, even if only from their perspective, the status of these teachers was lessened rather than improved. The result, in this study, was that the teachers attributed the successes of their students in large part to their existing programs rather than to RTI. This attribution is especially troublesome when we consider Guskey’s (2002) goals of professional development. In this model, Guskey described the change in student learning outcomes as a necessary prerequisite to the change in teacher attitudes and beliefs. This position is further reinforced by the literature on teacher buy-in, which clearly states that the opportunity to see improvement in student learning is one of the most essential motivators for the continued implementation of new initiatives (Denton, Vaughn, & Fletcher, 2003). These motivational implications make the teachers’ unwillingness to acknowledge the contribution of RTI to the improvement in their students’ learning particularly troublesome.

The participants commonly described their motivations for participating in the pilot project as the desire to improve both practice and student learning. If the teachers who implement the RTI model do not perceive that either of these goals have been met, then their motivations to continue their participation and to sustain the use of RTI in their classrooms may dwindle. Returning once again to Maeroff’s (1988) description of
empowering professional development, it is essential to communicate to teachers that they are professionals and treat them as such. In this study, the teachers perceived a questioning of their professionalism through the challenging of their existing teaching practice. There must be coherence between the structure of the RTI model and existing professional practices to ensure that it complements rather than competes with existing programs. While RTI *does* require a shift in how teachers assess and work with students who are at-risk, it *does not* purport to replace all existing literacy instruction. Instead, it requires teachers to use the data collected through regular progress monitoring to select the most appropriate strategies to improve the learning trajectories of students who are at-risk. What must be acknowledged by researchers is that these strategies may already be part of a teacher’s repertoire. Including teachers in the decision making when designing the model’s implementation, as was advocated by both Guskey (2003) and Maeroff (1988), may facilitate the integration of existing practice with the empirically validated strategies advocated by the RTI model and achieve true buy-in. As well, providing teachers with the opportunity to discuss their existing instructional strategies and the strategies of their colleagues in terms of the assessment data may empower the teachers to confidently make decisions about how to improve the learning trajectories of students who are at-risk. The collaborative problem solving model shared in Fang et al. (2004) may provide a means for accomplishing this goal.

The participants in this study shared their view that sufficient time had been spent discussing the progress monitoring tool, and as such described their readiness to shift from the information sharing style of their monthly meetings towards the sharing of instructional strategies. Fang et al.’s (2004) professional development model, which included problem-solving meetings where teachers presented information about students
who were at-risk and received suggestions from their colleagues, seems to be a logical next step in the implementation of the RTI model. This problem solving structure would allow for the continued collaboration of the participants in this pilot while increasing their ability to use the data to make informed instructional decisions. The inclusion of the teachers in both the design of the implementation model and the problem solving process will not only allow for a more seamless integration of the model in classrooms, but will also do so in a manner that promotes the professionalism of teachers.

Conclusions

This study sought to explore the conditions in which the responsiveness to intervention model could successfully be implemented from the perspectives of teachers participating in a one-year pilot project. My data confirm both Guskey’s (2003) and Maeroff’s (1988) argument for the need for a supportive environment that ensures the provision of professional development that promotes an increase in teacher knowledge, sufficient time for teachers to deepen this knowledge, and regular opportunities to collaborate with both their in-school colleagues and other members of the research team. Where the implementation was successful, these supports were provided through regular meetings that were initiated and planned by an in-school lead teacher who spearheaded the implementation by listening carefully to the needs of the classroom teachers and providing a positive and motivating atmosphere. From the data gathered in this study, two supports emerged that could contribute to future implementations of the RTI model. The first is the importance of an in-school lead teacher. The second is the inclusion of regular in-school meetings that begin with logistics sharing, progress to providing opportunities
to increase teacher knowledge, and eventually embrace a collaborative problem solving model to improve the learning of students who are at-risk.

While these conditions supported the successful *initial* implementation of the RTI model, further supports are necessary to ensure the sustainability of the implementation. Teachers require an approach that coherently integrates both existing initiatives and existing practice with the expectations of RTI. Researchers must further explore how to develop coherence between Ministry expectations and teachers’ resulting responsibilities, and the expectations of the RTI model. In future implementations, these altered expectations must be communicated to teachers in a manner that facilitates empowerment and that will encourage the teachers’ participation in the design of the implementation model. This participation should help to ensure that future implementations foster the development of professionalism in the teachers through empowering them to make instructional decisions that will help them build on their existing practice and, as a result, improve the learning of their students.
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Letter of Information

With this letter, we invite you to participate in a research study entitled “Turning promising theory into productive practice: The perspectives of educators in the response-to-intervention model”. This project is conducted by Angela Pyle and Dr. Lesly Wade-Woolley at the Faculty of Education of Queen’s University. It has been cleared by the General Research Ethics Board of Queen’s University.

The RTI project, with progress monitoring, has been implemented in five schools in 2007-2008, and you have been a key participant in this process. We have a genuine interest in learning about what works well, and what problems arise, when working within an RTI model. Other aspects of the project will be measuring student reading progress directly, but we feel that there are many other outcomes that should also be assessed, in order to understand the potential benefits and challenges in implementing this approach. We are interested, for example, in how your involvement in RTI has influenced your approach to delivering services in schools, your working relationships with colleagues from other departments, and your own professional development needs. We would also value any information that you can share with us about what RTI looks like “in action”.

To this end, we are inviting you to participate in a focus group with 5 teachers from other schools who have also been participants in the RTI program. If you agree to participate, you will meet with two researchers from Queen’s University at your school at a mutually convenient time for approximately one hour. We have contacted you because you indicated an interest in participation in a previous communication with *****. The focus group will be audiotaped and transcribed verbatim at a later date.

There are no known risks, discomforts or inconveniences associate with participation in the study. Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. You are not obliged to engage in any activity that you find objectionable, or answer any question which makes you feel uncomfortable. There is no remuneration or compensation for participation in the focus group.

All the data collected from you will remain strictly confidential. It is very important for us to maintain the confidentiality of the participants in this research, therefore:

- No names will be used in the computerized datafiles or in published work;
- The data will remain the property of Queen’s University and be stored in a locked office at Queen’s University;
- The media on which your oral responses are recorded will be erased directly after transcription;
- Only the investigators and their trained research assistants will have access to the data;
• The data will be used only for research purposes. Likewise, to maintain the confidentiality of all participants in the focus group, it is important that you agree to refrain from using the names of other staff members and to refrain from repeating what you hear from others during the group conversation.

The data from this research will be used in the M.Ed. thesis of Angela Pyle. The overall findings of this research will also be shared with ***** (the research unit of the *****SB) and may also be published in academic and educational research journals and presented at scholarly meetings. Secondary uses of the data will be subject to clearance by the General Research Ethics Board of Queen’s University.

If you choose to participate, please complete and sign the accompanying consent form and return it to the research assistant. If you do so, it tells us that you understand the procedures involved and that you give your informed consent to participate. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

If you have any questions about this project, please do not hesitate to contact Dr. Lesly Wade-Woolley at 613-533-6000, ext. 77230. If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, you may contact the Education Research Ethics Board at erb@queensu.ca or Dr. Steven Leighton, the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board of Queen’s University, at 613-533-6000 ext. 77034, email greb.chair@queensu.ca.

Sincerely,

Angela Pyle
M.Ed. Student

Lesly Wade-Woolley, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
**Consent Form**

I agree to participate in the study entitled “Turning promising theory into productive practice: The perspectives of educators in the response-to-intervention model” conducted by Angela Pyle and Dr. Lesly Wade-Woolley of the Faculty of Education at Queen's University.

I have read and retained a copy of the Letter of Information and the purpose of the study has been explained to my satisfaction. I have had any questions answered to my satisfaction.

I understand that the data will be used in Angela Pyle’s M.Ed. thesis and that the researchers intend to publish the findings of the study.

I understand that the overall findings of the study will be shared with ****SB.

I understand that my oral responses will be audiorecorded and erased after transcription.

I understand that participation is voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw from this study at any time without negative consequences.

I understand that I am not required to answer any question that I find objectionable.

I understand the provisions that have been made to preserve confidentiality.

I agree to refrain from naming other members of staff and to refrain from repeating what I hear in the focus group.

I am aware that I can contact Dr. Lesly Wade-Woolley at 613-533-6000 ext. 77230 if I have any questions about this project, and I am aware that for questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Education Research Ethics Board at erb@queensu.ca or Dr. Steven Leighton, the Chair of the General Research Ethics Board of Queen’s University, at 613-533-6000 ext. 77034, email greb.chair@queensu.ca.

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THIS CONSENT FORM AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Name (Please Print):  

Signature:  

Date  


Appendix B

Focus Group Questions

Introductory Question
Please tell us who you are and one thing you love about teaching.

Key Questions
I’d like to ask each of you to share something that you’ve introduced and its impact on your teaching.
(probe: What do you do now that you didn’t do before RTI?)
I’d really like to hear you talk about the kind of impact this has had on your students’ learning.
(probe: How has progress monitoring …)
There are many different understandings of RTI. One of the things I’d like to know is how you interpret RTI.
What would you tell a trusted colleague about RTI?
(probe: What did you like? What did you not like?)

Ending Question
What are the most important messages I can take back that would make this work even better next year?
(probe: What supports were most useful? What obstacles did you face?)

Final Question
Is there anything we should have talked about but didn’t?