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PROMISES AND CHALLENGES OF SCHOOLWIDE IMPLEMENTATION OF RESPONSE TO INSTRUCTION (RtI): PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Response to Instruction (RtI) is a framework used by schools to organize curriculum, instruction, and assessment so that all students are screened on a regular basis and those who are at-risk for not meeting standards are provided with appropriate interventions (Batsche, Kavale, & Kovaleski, 2006). This article explores principals' responses to open-ended questions regarding RtI implementation in one New England state. The purpose of the study was to determine the extent to which RtI was being implemented at the local level and across the state, as well as to identify principals' perceptions of associated benefits and challenges. The survey was administered to all K–12 principals in the state and had a response rate of 62.4%. The study's findings point to the need for policies and organizational structures that ensure time for school professionals to analyze data and collaborate with one another to engage in data-based decision-making; promote consistent, ongoing and targeted effective professional development; and address teacher belief systems and school culture.

INTRODUCTION

Public schools across the nation face challenges related to ensuring that all students meet local, state, and national standards; meeting the needs of all students; providing early and evidence-based interventions for struggling students; and tracking student progress. Academic interventions for at-risk students are often implemented unevenly or not used until a student struggles enough that he or she qualifies for a special education evaluation. Furthermore, struggling students who do not qualify for special education often do not receive the supports they need to be successful (D. Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003). The Response to Instruction (RtI) framework has been developed as a possible solution to many of these challenges, offering the promise of enhanced student achievement, more equitable access to high quality learning environments, and decreased numbers of special education referrals (D. Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; D. Fuchs et al., 2003). Previous research has focused on the effectiveness of specific interventions used in RtI models and characteristics associated with successful school-wide implementation; however, little is known or understood about how RtI has been implemented across an entire state and whether principals in schools implementing RtI find it useful for addressing learning challenges (L. S. Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Kozleski & Huber, 2010).

RtI is a tiered model that schools can use to organize curriculum, instruction, and assessment so that all students are assessed on a regular basis to identify those at risk of not meeting standards, and those who are being provided with support and monitored regularly and are not meeting standards (Batsche et al., 2006; Renaissance Learning, 2009). The model is predicated on a set of assumptions that include use of regularly administered universal screening measures, scientifically based curricula in the general education setting, interdisciplinary team data-based decision-making, evidence-based interventions for students requiring tiered levels of support, and ongoing progress monitoring, to determine the effectiveness of interventions (Batsche et al., 2006; D. Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Harry & Klingner, 2007; Kame'enui, 2007). The approach is designed to allow schools to engage in early detection, prevention, and support for students who are struggling in school so that unnecessary referrals to special education can be avoided and achievement gaps can be closed (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). The framework's focus on data based decision making among general educators, special educators, and families has the potential to promote collaboration, and, in turn, result in increased achievement among students at risk for not meeting standards (Harn, Chard, & Kame'enui, 2011).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A significant growth in the body of research on RtI has occurred in the last ten years, with the majority of studies focusing on the theoretical constructs and benefits of the model and/or the efficacy of specific elements of individual and school wide implementation. Much of the research has focused on the degree to which the model is an accurate way of determining eligibility among students with learning disabilities, and/or the degree to which it is being implemented with fidelity within specific classrooms and intervention settings (e.g., Bryant et al., 2008; Burns & Senesac, 2005; Case, Speece, & Molloy, 2003; Coyne, Kame'enui, Simmons, & Harn, 2004; Daly, Martens, Barnett, Witt, & Olsen, 2007; Fuchs, 2003; Fuchs, Fuchs, Compton, Bryant, Hamlett, & Seethaler, 2007; Jenkins, Hudson, & Johnson, 2007; Kavale, 2005; McMaster, Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2005; Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008; O'Connor, Harty, &

Fulmer, 2005). The "What Works Clearinghouse" (Clearinghouse, 2009) lists interventions and data regarding their evidence base, noting that implementation of interventions with a strong evidence base may reduce special education referrals and increase student achievement.

Other studies of RtI have investigated various components of systems level implementation, including the need for school wide professional development and training. These studies identified a lack of access to resources and professional development as barriers to RtI implementation, specifically ongoing development focused on the need for change (Graner, Faggella-Luby, & Fritschmann, 2005; Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor, & Cardarelli, 2010). Importantly, research suggests that in order to promote systems wide implementation, professional development for RtI must continue to underscore the idea that the model is about success for all students, not any particular subgroup or group with specific needs (Danielson, Doolittle, & Bradley, 2007).

Another focus of the RtI literature has been on collaboration among general and special educators. RtI models necessitate that general educators and special educators collaborate with one another in data-based decision-making teams, in co-teaching situations, and in consultation and problem-solving with general educators to ensure that the majority of students' needs are met within the classroom (Greenfield et al., 2010; Mahdavi & Beebe-Frankenberger, 2009; Murawski & Hughes, 2009).

Several studies have explored the role of school leaders in RtI implementation (Hoover & Love, 2011; Schools, 2010). These studies have found that RtI requires significant efforts on the part of school leaders, specifically with regard to establishing the purpose and intent of RtI and the need for all teachers to participate in implementation. Principals have been found to play a key role in re-organizing service delivery, promoting data-based decision-making within teams, and providing adequate time for professional development for both general and special educators (Schools, 2010; Shepherd & Salembier, 2010).

Finally, a growing body of literature on RtI includes empirically-based studies investigating the implementation of RtI in authentic school settings (Dexter, Hughes, & Farmer, 2008; Kovaleski, 2007; Shepherd & Salembier, 2010). Critical elements of implementation identified in these studies include: leadership for change, collaboration among general and special educators, effective professional development, provision of evidence based instruction and interventions, and high quality classroom instruction. Although the literature has not yet established a causal connection between school wide implementation of RtI and increased student outcomes, emerging evidence supports the idea that systemic and consistent implementation may be positively associated with increased student outcomes (Johnson & Smith, 2008; Shepherd & Salembier, 2010).

Rationale and Context for the Current Study

Despite the growing body of research on RtI, few large-scale studies have explored local level implementation across multiple sites. Several states, including New York, Maine, and Florida, have conducted internal studies regarding RtI implementation in their states; however, few published studies have explored the degree to which local level RtI implementation has occurred statewide, particularly in rural environments. The state in which this study was conducted presented an interesting context for an implementation study, in that the department of education's approach has been to encourage local level implementation, rather than to mandate it through a single statewide directive.

In considering these contextual factors, the authors identified a need to conduct a study that would capture the current status of RtI implementation throughout the state and contribute to the larger body of literature on systems level implementation. Our intent was to understand the degree to which implementation was occurring within and across local school districts, as well as to identify patterns and trends that might confirm or extend previous studies of implementation. The study's conceptual framework draws on the literature on implementation and sustainability of school wide implementation, as well as on the notion that movement from research to practice is generally a complex endeavor requiring directive leadership, intensive professional development, appropriate changes in policy, incentives promoting adoption of new policies, and attention to implementation integrity (Burns & Scholin, 2013). The goals of this research were twofold: first, to describe and assess local levels of RtI implementation throughout the state and second, to provide information regarding current practices, emerging trends, and potential barriers that could be used in policy development, design and delivery of professional development, and design and delivery of technical assistance provided to implementing sites.

METHODOLOGY

The authors collaborated in designing a survey to be implemented with all K – 12 principals in the state. Following a review of the literature on school change and RtI, the team derived the most essential and systematically referenced parts of the model and created survey questions designed to gather data from school principals around the degree to which those key RtI components were present in their schools.

The resulting thirty-nine item survey included 34 closed response, likert-style survey questions, as well as five open-ended questions. The closed items were grouped around the following five major categories that captured essential elements of RtI implementation: core instruction, supplemental instruction, school-wide practices, interventions and supports, and assessment. The open-ended questions were added to allow principals to reflect and comment on their own experiences with implementation, and to provide us with a deeper look at the nature of implementation in a state that had chosen to support a primarily local approach to change. The five open-ended questions, which are the focus of this paper, asked principals to comment on their role in the RtI implementation process, challenges associated with school wide implementation of RtI, successes related to implementation, and rationale for engaging in implementation.

The survey was field tested twice, once with a sample of schools from across the state and a second time with a single school site. It was then deployed to each of the state's 330 K-12, public school principals using an online survey portal. Each participant received an email with an invitation to access the survey through a web link. The survey used a personalized letter, which included an endorsement from the state's education agency. Two follow-up emails were sent in an effort to increase response rates.

Data associated with the open-ended questions were managed, coded, and analyzed through the data analysis software program Altas.ti (2011). A qualitative thematic approach (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Patton, 2002) was used to analyze the codes and develop primary themes. A preliminary set of codes was identified through the literature review and in association with the questions. Team members independently applied the initial set of codes to five surveys, with team members conferring afterwards about their coding results. Based on this discussion, a revised set of codes that included emergent codes from the text as well as some collapsing of

codes was developed and applied to the remaining surveys. Finally, the team used principles associated with the process of constant comparison (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007) to analyze coded text across survey respondents. This process resulted in the identification of four primary themes that reflected recurring patterns and trends in the data and are used to describe findings: 1) strengthening infrastructure and resources, 2) addressing the challenge of change, 3) refocusing priorities and 4) improving outcomes for all students.

206 of 330 surveys were returned for a response rate of 62.4%. The demographics of respondents are described below:

Table 1
Respondents by School Level

School Level	Number
Elementary School	104
Middle School	46
High School	28
No Response	28

Table 2
Levels of RtI Implementation

	Total	Elementary	Middle	High
Full	14.43%	8.9%	8.7%	42.9%
Partial	60.43%	32.5%	63%	46.4%
Not at all	25.13%	9.9%	28.3%	7.1%

As indicated in Table 1, the overwhelming majority of respondents came from elementary schools. This was not surprising, given both that there are more elementary schools in the state than middle or high schools, and that RtI implementation is much more common at the elementary school level. As seen in Table 2, the majority of the schools reported that they engaged in doing at least some level of RtI implementation, which they defined as either "partial" or "full implementation."

LIMITATIONS

The study is not without its limitations. The first is that given the few number of high schools in the sample, the data has limited applicability to that group of schools. Additionally, as the study was conducted in a single rural state that has taken a more grassroots approach to RtI implementation, states that are more urban or that have undertaken a more systematic approach might find different results. Lastly, as with all qualitative research, the results are, generally speaking, only applicable to the principals who completed the study.

FINDINGS

Data analysis led to four emerging themes that have implications for future policy, practice, and research around systemic implementation of RtI, including: 1) Strengthening Infrastructure and Resources, 2) Addressing the Challenge of Change, 3) Refocusing of Priorities, and 4) Improving Outcomes for all Students. These themes reflect a variety of views expressed by the principals regarding the benefits and challenges of RtI implementation, the potential for the model to improve student achievement, and the effects of implementation across an array of school community members. Each theme works to capture the views of principals expressed most often across the data, as well as more unique stances taken by a few principals. It should be noted that although most principals expressed a variety of challenges associated with implementation, the majority of them delineated numerous benefits as well.

Strengthening Infrastructure and Resources

According to principals participating in this study, the implementation of RtI requires a strong infrastructure and additional resources to be successful. Numerous principals described a variety of challenges and concerns related to this theme, including time and resources for implementation and professional development, and the need for increased collaboration among staff.

Time and resources

Access to consistent time for meeting and development to ensure successful implementation was an issue discussed almost universally by principals. One principal reported: It is most difficult to find the time to provide the PD needed and to bring in multiple new initiatives. Time for study, reflection, collaboration and planning is hard to find in an already busy schedule for all." Further, another principal explained: "Fidelity to the program continues to be a struggle. We need a consistent time to meet, to nurture collaboration, and to analyze results that can be translated into instruction aimed at what students need." Study results demonstrate that time is a lynchpin for RtI success. If school professionals have adequate time for collaboration, training and data analysis, RtI has the potential to achieve desired outcomes, but without it, the volume becomes unmanageable. This seemed particularly true for principals who identified their schools as being in the early stages of implementation where they needed to learn the components of the model and become more comfortable with systems change.

Need for collaboration

A number of participants also discussed issues related to collaboration, staff, and professional development. In addition to the time constraints identified above, principals expressed concerns about getting building staff to collaborate and ensuring that staff members were on-board with the RtI model. One principal reported being challenged by "getting staff to collaborate and providing professional development especially in the area of data collection and analysis, and technology (e.g., AIMSWeb)." The same principal further explained the "need to restructure supplemental services delivery model, and to carve out time for planning with structure of school day." As RtI involves so many different professionals sharing knowledge, responsibilities and data, the principals focused on the need for professionals to have the skills and dispositions to work together.

Addressing the Challenge of Change

Nearly every participant who responded to the open-ended questions spoke about some aspect of the challenges associated with change. Specifically, principals addressed changing school culture and belief systems - ideas that seemed to be at the heart of many of the struggles around RtI implementation.

Changing School Culture

One key idea that emerged was the need to change school culture so that teachers would take ownership for all students, rather than viewing students who were struggling to meet standards as being the responsibility of special educators. One principal commented on the importance of "establishing the practice of teachers being responsible for educating all students," while another noted that "it works for kids. If the implementation comes with a shift in attitude, then a school will consistently make decisions that are based on what students need. Eventually, all staff will believe that they are responsible for all students." As part of this shift in culture, the principals commented on the need for teachers to be open and willing to engage in trial and error. One principal spoke about the struggle of "getting staff to have ownership of all students, getting them to document interventions and to be willing to try different things." Across participant responses, it was evident that implementation of RtI requires collaborative efforts among all school professionals as well as a willingness to take ownership of all students in the school and think about or alter teaching practices as necessary to meet their needs. These ideas and practices were deeply embedded in school culture, and needed to be identified and supported by the principals.

Belief Systems

Survey respondents discussed at length the challenges of addressing teachers' belief systems. Principals expressed frustration at the "pass the buck attitude" of addressing student learning concerns, identifying the need to encourage teachers to focus on the strengths and challenges of each individual student, and the general attitudes of the community. For example, one principal wrote that "Not all teachers believe that the focus should be on their instructional practices ('I teach and they should learn')." Clearly this principal saw teacher beliefs about instruction as a potential barrier to RtI implementation. Another principal echoed this sentiment, stating that "We need attitudinal change in the community, among students and staff. There is not a universal belief that all students can learn."

As RtI is predicated on the notion that all students can learn, it is crucial that schools engage in discussions about belief systems and come to a consensus about goals and understandings. It is clear that this issue was a key challenge for many of the administrators who responded to this survey. One principal explained that: "Changing the culture to where if a student is experiencing failure, it is our responsibility to solve the problem." Another respondent stated that it is "hard to change the culture around struggling learners, getting teachers to own the challenge rather than pass it on to others." The principals acknowledged that implementation of the RtI model requires that teachers engage in critical self-reflection around their own teaching practices. In order for effective implementation to occur, school professionals must be engaged in examining their own belief systems.

Refocusing of Priorities

In spite of the challenges that principals identified with respect to RtI implementation, a majority spoke to the potential of the initiative to refocus and address priorities. Specifically, principals spoke to the renewed focus on learning outcomes for all students, an increase in equitable access to high quality learning, and the shift to a more positive way of looking at student needs and strengths.

Focus on student outcomes

Numerous respondents described how RtI had helped teachers in their schools reengage with the idea of teaching and learning. One principal explained that: "RtI helps a school community focus on 'first things first.' You have to make sure kids are really learning disabled rather than curriculum disabled." According to the respondents, the RtI model focuses on providing all students with access to high quality curriculum and instruction in the general education setting, thus it shifts the focus from trying to figure out what is wrong with a specific student to ensuring that all students have access to the curriculum.

Much of the RtI literature focuses on the ways in which it provides an alternative to the more traditional "wait to fail" model of special education identification (Brown-Chidsey, 2007). This idea was apparent in the survey data. One respondent shared that "the responsibility for educating ALL the students becomes the responsibility of all the staff. Students are monitored so the gaps between students meeting and not meeting standards do not become too big. Teachers have very meaningful conversations about how to better support students in their learning." A number of principals noted that students receive the supports that they need to learn and achieve when they need them, rather than allowing the gaps to become too large. Thus, principals noted that implementation of the model has the potential to shift the focus of learning to needs and outcomes rather than deficits.

Equity

A number of respondents also viewed RtI as a model with the potential to promote equity in terms of educational access and performance, ensuring that all students have the chance to achieve and succeed. One principal spoke extensively on this subject specifically, writing:

> There is a distinct correlation between socioeconomic status and educational performance. There is no question that our low socioeconomic students, generally speaking, do not perform as well academically as their more affluent peers. Our RtI program is a regular education initiative designed to help address this critical issue. We are making a conscious and concerted effort to address the inequality that, as a culture, we have long ignored.

Additionally, as RtI supports and enhances learning for all students, learning can be accessed equally by all. One principal captured this sentiment, noting that: "It is less about identifying problems with students, and more about finding solutions that work for learning."

Student strengths

Participants wrote about how RtI has helped their schools focus more on student strengths, while helping students address areas of challenge. One principal reported that:

> RtI meets the needs of the individual. In many cases, students receive services within the classroom. RtI keeps the teacher involved and accountable. RtI helps students to recognize their strengths and challenges. RtI respects the learner. The student maintains confidence as a learner.

Thus, the model allows for the focus on strengths while demonstrating that school professionals meet student needs in a more immediate way. Another principal voiced a similar sentiment, explaining that "The greatest success is providing a systematic intervention that meets students at their point of learning and moves them forward. It has helped us to identify student learning needs, without having to perform a comprehensive evaluation." The majority of principals reported that RtI allows their schools to focus on what students can do and finds a way to make school work for them when they are struggling.

Improving Outcomes for all Students

One theme that was consistent throughout the data was that implementing RtI led to improved outcomes for students. Key ideas emerged from the analysis related to reducing special education referrals by providing early intervention, and intervening early and often to address learning challenges, making schools work for students, and addressing student challenges.

Early and consistent identification of student needs

Specifically, principals reported that teachers possessed greater knowledge about students' actual academic achievement and progress. One principal reported that:

> What we do with children in the classroom must be based on how they respond to previous instruction. Since beginning RtI, each teacher can confidently say-"I know what instruction this child has had, I know where they are with skill development, and I know what to do next."

The results indicate that collecting and reviewing data on students has resulted in increased knowledge and understanding about student learning processes and levels of student achievement. One principal commented that there is an "earlier identification of needs. It pushes us to try interventions in a more systematic and increasingly intensive manner instead of testing, qualifying, and creating an IEP." Another expressed a similar sentiment, explaining that RtI is about "keeping students in the classroom, but using accommodations that allow the student to keep up with classmates is imperative. We can no longer allow students to get so far behind that they are eligible for special education." As a result of RtI implementation interventions and instruction are being done deliberately and with intention. Student needs are being addressed earlier and more consistently.

Making schools work

The idea that RtI provided a way for schools to work, "the way they should" was another essential concept that emerged from analysis. One principal put it simply that "RtI is how education is supposed to work. The model keeps the focus on improving learning for all in an excuse-free environment." The sentiment was echoed by other administrators who reported that the framework put the focus back on whole-class learning and encouraged teachers to make

classrooms work for students and also helped schools to remain compliant with the law. One respondent explained that "our percentage of students who now meet grade level targets continues to increase. Special education referrals are fewer, and we know more about students when we begin the process. Students who might fall through the cracks of our system are being identified for interventions." RtI implementation allows schools to be more effective at engaging in the work of teaching and learning and forced schools to become more objective in referrals.

Addressing student challenges

Another key idea that emerged was the early identification of students with learning struggles and the reduction in special education referrals. Principals reported that the RtI model enabled them to not only reduce special education numbers, but also to provide students with the support they need within the classroom context. One principal identified a specific outcome of RtI implementation, writing that "All of the students receiving specific interventions made progress. Out of twenty, only one required special education." Thus, providing students with services at their point of learning, rather than waiting until they are far enough behind to require a special education referral, allowed schools to increase learning, reduce costly and time consuming special education evaluations, and move students through the curriculum. Principals also reported that not only were interventions occurring earlier, they were occurring much more deliberately. One person explained that "because of RtI, we are identifying children with disabilities and struggles much earlier and more often so interventions are occurring much earlier and with more deliberate intent." Reducing unnecessary special education referrals has the added benefit of allowing evaluation and instruction resources to be used on the students who need them most.

For many of the principals who responded to the survey, RtI appeared to be a transformational systems change initiative that provided their schools with a mechanism to help increase school wide achievement. Principals spoke about the challenges associated with implementation, but they also discussed the ways in which student learning outcomes were directly impacted as a result of implementation.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of the statewide RtI survey indicates that there are both successes and challenges associated with RtI implementation. Principals reported great success with student achievement and early intervention, but expressed concerns about structural and resources challenges as well as elements of school culture that present barriers to implementation. The results indicate new findings related to the role of school leaders, teacher ideas, and belief systems regarding the implementation of RtI.

Overall, principal responses reflected the literature on school change (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008; Batsche et al., 2006; Brown-Chidsey, 2007). As with many institutions, organizational change is often difficult to implement. Principals become accustomed to routines and procedures and are generally slow to get on board with new initiatives, even those that have been proven to be effective. In an educational context in which new programs and initiatives are perceived to be initiated with rapid frequency, it becomes difficult for school administrators and teachers to see any initiative as anything but "the next great fad." Further, there are conflicting beliefs about the purpose and role of public schools in America. Survey responses suggest that it

is difficult for many school personnel to see RtI in terms of reframing and improving the work they are doing, as opposed to doing more work.

Data analysis indicates that teachers need to take full ownership of all students in order for RtI implementation to be effective and work to increase student achievement. This finding is confirmed by the literature (Brownell et al., 2002; Kozleski & Huber, 2010). However, this analysis further suggests that teacher values and belief systems play a key role in the implementation and effectiveness of the RtI framework. As RtI is predicated on the idea that all students have access to high quality general education classroom instruction that meets their individual learning needs, it is important for teachers to be invested both in believing that all students are capable of achieving and working with other building based professionals to ensure that students are receiving instruction and supports that are effective. Results demonstrate that this is not always the case and not all teachers believe that all students can learn. If we are to move forward nationally with RtI implementation, it will be important to further examine and operationalize the ways in which teacher belief systems impact its effectiveness. More importantly, it will be necessary to provide both pre-service and current teachers with effective training and professional development that seeks to uncover and further explore the relationship between their own beliefs and student achievement.

CONCLUSION

The results of this research point to a number of implications for policy, practice, and research. First is the need to ensure that policies and practices reflect the basic tenets of RtI. Specifically, policies at both the federal and state level may need to be re-examined to ensure that they are flexible with regard to the use of time and the roles of general and special educators as well as structure around collaboration and analysis of student data. This flexibility has the potential to promote two of RtI's key components: more integrated service delivery approaches and effective use of data.

Second, it is clear that we need to provide states, districts, and schools with access to more training and resources around how to implement RtI. The results indicate that schools are struggling with training teachers and staff and getting entire school communities on board with implementation initiatives. Specifically, school and district leaders need access to training about how to prepare their staff for the shift to a more holistic approach to supporting students within the general education setting (Bergstrom, 2008; Danielson et al., 2007; Kratochwill et al., 2007).

The study offers a number of implications for future research. Future studies might examine implementation efforts in other states with different contexts, such as those that are more urban, have more diverse populations of students, or have engaged in a more "top-down" approach to implementation. Finally, it is clear that additional research is needed to understand how RtI implementation is occurring at the high school level.

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