Middle School Educators Interpretations and Perceptions of a School District’s RTI Initiative:

A Descriptive Case Study

A Doctoral Thesis presented

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctorate of Education

College of Professional Studies

Northeastern University

Boston, Massachusetts

June 2016
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my advisor Dr. Chris Unger for his support and guidance. His encouragement, wisdom and persistence allowed me to finish this process for which I am truly grateful. I would also like to thank Dr. Kristal Clemons and Dr. Leslie Scollins who served as my second and third readers, respectively.

Thank you to several of my mentors throughout my career who have had a profound affect on who I am as a person and educator: Walter Lyons, Linda Fries, Susan Rosenzweig, Patricia Fry, Susan Lynch, and Bob Louzan. Especially to my dear friend and confidant Dr. Anita Woods who helped me immensely through this program. I am truly lucky to work with such amazing educators who have made and continue to make profound differences in the lives of children and their families.

Lastly, to my family. My parents who gave me the love of education and the strong foundation to make my dreams possible. My daughters, Avery, Claudia and Emerson who have been patience, tolerant and understanding so that I could complete this endeavor. My husband, Michael who has gone above and beyond to make my dreams a reality. Your love and support kept me going when I needed it the most. You are my biggest fan and cheerleader. I am eternally grateful to have you as my partner in life.
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the interpretations and perceptions of educators regarding a school district’s expectation for RTI and the current state of RTI in a large suburban middle school. The study sought to answer three research questions: 1) How have building administrators and educators at one middle school interpreted the district’s expectation for the implementation of RTI?; 2) What are the perceptions of building administrators and educators at one middle school regarding the school’s current state of RTI?; 3) What do building administrators and educators believe could improve the current state of RTI?

A qualitative study design was used to gather interpretations and perspectives of district, and building administrators and teachers. James P. Spillane’s cognitive framework theory (Spillane, 2009) was used to inform this study. A combination of individual interviews and focus groups were used to collect data relative to the research questions. First and second cycle coding was used to determine emergent themes and patterns. A rich, descriptive narrative was used to communicate the results of the study.

The findings of this study suggest that there is a district expectation for the implementation of RTI, however at the middle school studied educators believed that not enough specific guidance was provided in order for the school to effectively implement an effective RTI program. As a result, there is agreement among teachers and administrators that more support is needed in several areas to ensure the successful development and implementation of RTI at the middle school.
Chapter I: Introduction

Problem Statement

Response to Intervention (RTI) has been widely promoted by educational experts, it stands out as a promising educational delivery model to support students and improve instruction in America’s schools (Cooper, Slavin, & Madden 1998). RTI is a comprehensive, systematic approach to teaching and learning, most commonly depicted as a three-tiered instructional model, where 80% of all students are able to be successful in the general education setting using universal design and differentiated instruction (Tier I). Students who require intervention are referred to Tier 2: fluid groupings that offer students varying degrees of intensity and targeted intervention. Tier 3: is provided to students more frequently than Tier 2 (usually daily) and by highly specialized staff. Students who do not respond to this high degree of intervention are then referred to special education for an evaluation. The concept of RTI builds upon recommendations from the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services that students with disabilities should be considered general education students first. This embraces a model of prevention as opposed to a model of failure. RTI’s preventative approach is intended to rectify the long-standing problems of over-identifying students for special education (Wixson, 2011).

RTI has been promoted by professional associations and educational experts such as: The National Association of State Special Education Directors, National Association of School Psychologists, and the International Reading Association, to such a degree that the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and the 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act both include language that supports the methodology of RTI (Sansosti, Telzrow, & Noltemeyer, 2010). In addition, in 2011 the state of Massachusetts initiated The Massachusetts Tiered
System of Support initiative (MTSS), a Response to Intervention blueprint, which outlines a system of supports that is responsive to the academic and non-academic needs of all students. This blueprint is intended to provide a framework for school improvement that focuses on system structures and supports across districts, schools, and classrooms to meet the academic and non-academic needs of all students (www.doe.mass.edu/mtss/blueprint/default.html).

The effectiveness of top-down reform approaches, however, has been debated. Local implementation of large top-down initiatives is difficult due to a key dimension of the process that is often overlooked: individual teachers interpret the expectation for the initiative differently. Each teacher comes to the process with a variety of knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes, which vary greatly from teacher to teacher (Spillane, 2009). The differences in interpretation impact a teacher’s understanding of the message, and without a clear, consistent message regarding implementation expectations, any reform effort will likely fail (Spillane, 2009). However, when policy directives are paired with clear goals for implementation and a common vision, they are more likely to be implemented with success (Spillane, 2009).

In order for reform efforts such as RTI to be implemented effectively, teachers must first understand what they are being asked to do. A top-down initiative without a consistent message and clear steps to implementation undermines the initiative and ultimately ends in teacher frustration and reform failure. Moreover, the implementation of RTI as a top-down initiative remains especially difficult because implementation research remains sparse, especially at the middle school level (Sansosti et al., 2010). Therefore, the problem of practice for this study can be defined as the following: How do middle school educators interpret and perceive a top-down Response to Intervention reform effort at the local level?
Significance of the Problem

American students are not learning the skills or acquiring the knowledge that they need to succeed in today’s world. The National Assessment of Educational Progress reported in 2011 the following statistics: approximately two-thirds of eighth grade students cannot read proficiently, two-thirds of eighth grade students scored below proficient in math, three out of four eighth grade students cannot write proficiently, 1.1 million American students drop out of school annually, and the dropout rate for African-American and Hispanic students is 40% (NAEP, 2001).

Students in our public schools lag behind their peers in most other industrialized nations. After World War I, the US had the highest high school graduation rate. Today we have dropped to #22 among 27 industrialized nations. American students ranked 25th in math, 17th in science, and 14th in reading, as compared to 27 other industrialized nations. By the end of the eighth grade, many US students are two years behind in math as compared to students in other countries, and US students continue to perform worse in math and science as they get older. As a result of this, US students are not prepared to finish college. Statistics from the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2010) cited that only 46% of American students finish college, and only 1 in 4 high school students graduate ready to attend college, as measured by the number of students who entered college needing to take remedial courses. As a result, our youth will not be prepared to compete for 21st century careers and jobs. These and other indicators have schools under enormous pressure to find ways of improving student performance (Brozo, 2009). Public school educators have witnessed unprecedented top-down efforts from federal, state, and local lawmakers to improve the quality and content of instruction in America’s schools (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002).
Middle school educators are under added pressure, because middle school represents a critical point in a student’s academic career, laying the foundation for successful completion of high school (Morris, Ehren, & Lenz, 1991). Therefore, there is a sense of urgency among middle school educators to enhance resources, improve instruction, and provide intervention (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2010). Robert Balfanz (2009), states that middle school plays a pivotal role in enabling our nation to reach President Obama’s goal of graduating all students from high school prepared for college or advanced training, and that middle schools provide essential support for student success during and after high school. However, in order to accomplish this lofty goal, middle schools must be transformed.

RTI has been widely promoted by educational experts. It stands out as a promising educational delivery model to improve instruction in America’s schools and transform middle school in order to prepare students for high school and beyond (Cooper, Slavin, & Madden, 1998). However, even RTI will meet with failure if local school districts do not ensure that teacher interpretations and district expectations are aligned.

The significance of this research lies not only in its ability to explore how teachers and building administrators at one middle school have interpreted the districts expectation for the implementation of RTI, while examining their perceptions regarding the current state of RTI and their perceptions regarding possible improvements within the current model. This study may also provide insight into the subjects of school change and RTI implementation at the secondary level in general.

RTI research at the elementary level has been ongoing, but at the secondary level it remains limited, leaving middle schools to devise their own approaches when implementing RTI (Brozo, 2010). This research added to the limited body of research. There is a distinct
difference between elementary and middle schools. Therefore, it is likely that RTI may need to be modified in order to fit into the culture, climate, and structure of middle schools. This research may begin to provide insight into what RTI might “look like” at the middle school level (Fuchs et al., 2010).

**Purpose Statement**

The middle school where this research was conducted has been in the process of creating a culture and climate for RTI for the last four years. It appears however, that administrators at the building level and teachers may be unclear regarding how they implement the district’s expectations for RTI. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study is to gain insight into how teachers and administrators within one middle school have interpreted the districts expectation for the implementation of RTI, what are their perceptions of the current state of RTI and what do they believe could be done to improve the current state of RTI within their building.

**Positionality Statement**

As the director of special education for Plymouth Public Schools, my focus has been on breaking down the barriers of the strict binary system of regular education and special education, in which students have to fail before there are supports and interventions in place. I was hired three years ago, and after the initial implementation of RTI and therefore was not involved in any of the planning. As part of my entry plan into the district, I contracted with a well known and reputable educational consulting firm. Together, we conducted a comprehensive evaluation of the district’s programs. This provided me with a better understanding of the current status of programs and services within the district. From there, I identified strengths of existing programming and determine what issues might need to be addressed to enhance current programming. The report also provided recommendations to assist me in addressing program
needs, inclusive practices, and instructional supports in order to improve outcomes for all students.

One of several recommendations discussed in the report was the need to develop and implement RTI districtwide. Over the last five years, Plymouth Public Schools has been trying to create a districtwide culture and climate for RTI through training and professional development. Yet there is little evidence to suggest that RTI has met the district’s expectations for improving student outcomes. It is my position that the teachers at John Quincy Adams (JQA) Middle School who have been involved in the implementation of RTI have different interpretations of the district’s expectations and different perceptions regarding the implementation RTI. This has caused teacher frustration and confusion, resulting in an RTI project that has not met with success or sustainability. This research study provided insight into teacher and administrator interpretations of the district’s expectations for the implementation of RTI, which will allow the district to make adjustments in the implementation plan in order for RTI to regain momentum at JQA Middle School. Findings from this research have the potential to clarify if the lack of clear expectations and teachers’ feelings of confusion regarding the process have hindered implementation. This research will help the districts’ continued efforts in the implementation of RTI, by providing insight into what teachers have interpreted as the expectations for RTI and what teachers’ experiences have been during the process.

Limitation and biases for this study are as follows: I am currently employed as a district administrator in the district where the study took place. Therefore, it is possible that staff who participated in the study may not have been wholly honest or forthcoming in their responses. Although I did not formally evaluate anyone who was involved in the research study, teachers
who participated in the study could see my position within the district as one of authority and may have said things that they believed I wanted to hear.

My professional experiences and training in RTI have the potential to impact the way in which the data are analyzed and interpreted, ultimately influencing the conclusions of this study. As a result, I will need to overcome any preconceived notions about why there is a lack of momentum at John Quincy Adams (JQA) Middle School regarding the implementation of RTI. Having acknowledged that there is the potential for biases while conducting this research study, I will ensure that strict analytic processes and procedures are used throughout, and I will rely solely on the data provided to draw conclusions.

**Research Questions**

The main research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How have building administrators and educators at JQA Middle School interpreted the district’s expectations for the implementation of RTI?
2. What are the perceptions of building administrators and educators at JQA Middle School regarding the school’s current state of RTI?
3. What do building administrators and educators believe could improve the current state of RTI at JQA Middle School?

**Theoretical Framework**

The study is intended to explore how teachers in one middle school have interpreted the expectation for RTI and what has been their experience regarding the implementation of RTI in their school and the district. The study also seeks to glean insight into how the district can better support the RTI initiative at the middle school level. The research is grounded in James P. Spillane’s cognitive framework theory, which in turn is based on Weick’s (1995) sensemaking
theory. Weick’s sensemaking theory is helpful in examining how individuals within organizations interpret and make sense of change (Weick, 2005). Sensemaking lies in a person’s ability to translate a new construct into observable behaviors. In other words, it is a person’s ability to take information given to them, and to understand it enough so they are able to put those words into actions or behaviors that can be observed. Sensemaking is triggered when a change disrupts an established routine whereby people need to make sense of the new structures being implemented. Sensemaking is used to illustrate how people interpret a new framework, which influences the implementation of a new initiative (Wright & Manning, 2004).

Spillane’s (2009) cognitive framework theory takes Weick’s sensemaking theory one step further by taking into consideration the multiple complexities and influences that become involved when new concepts are being implemented. In other words, Spillane’s cognitive framework theory is not only based upon how individuals interpret information differently, given that each person has prior knowledge, beliefs and experiences that influence their understanding of new constructs, but it also considers the context and the situation in which change is occurring. Spillane (2009) suggests that the context is not simply a backdrop, but rather has a significant impact on the implementation of new constructs, and therefore cannot be dismissed when examining school change.

Context is a multifaceted construct that includes personal identities, organizational structures, traditions, culture, and climate. Implementation research suggests that context is especially influential when it comes to sensemaking. People’s immediate environment greatly contributes to the ways in which people make sense of a new experience. Organizational social norms and structures are also important contexts when those charged with changing norms, such as teachers and principals are trying to make sense of policy changes. Therefore, when
individuals are experiencing change, they draw not only upon their existing reservoir of knowledge to make sense of what is being asked of them, they also draw on the situation, context, and signals from the environment (Spillane et al., 2002). Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer (2009) developed this framework in three stages: Individual cognition, situated cognition, and role of representations. Individual cognition (IC) explores people as individual sensemakers, considering how individuals notice and interpret stimuli and how prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences influence the understanding of new ideas. Situation cognition (SC) suggests that the human sensemaking process is complicated by the situation or context in which the change is occurring. Role of representation (RR) considers the role of policy implementation in the changing of local practices. In other words, the framework considers the challenges of designing a policy at the federal level to be implemented locally (Spillane et al., 2015).

Spillane’s cognitive framework theory informed the study by providing a theoretical lens for the researcher to analyze the data collected during the study. Cognitive framework theory considers the context in which organizational change is occurring, while also considering stakeholder personal identities and experiences. These impact how individuals have interpreted the district’s expectation for the implementation of RTI. Cognitive framework theory assumes that each individual has experienced the district’s expectations differently, allowing for multiple interpretations of the same message. Multiple interpretations impact the ability of the reform effort to succeed. Even subtle differences in each person’s interpretation affect the reform because each individual envisions the change differently, which hinders the development of logical steps in order to implement the new construct.
Different Interpretations of the Same Message

A key problem organizations have as they undertake a structural change such as RTI is that individuals within the organization the new framework differently and typically not the way it was intended (Bettis & Prahalad, 1995). Successful, sustainable change requires that everyone involved in the change effort interpret the information in the same way, in order to move the framework from theory to implementation. How people interpret and experience the information and the process will determine what the implementation process will look like. Without consistent interpretation from all stakeholders, any reform will fall short of the expectation. In the context of this study, RTI is unlikely to meet the expectation of improved student programming if the educators who are charged with the implementation of the framework have different interpretations of how this will be done at the building level. For example, consider a science classroom with a teacher who has experience and proficiency in project-based science. A snapshot of her classroom may include several students throughout the classroom on computers, at desks, and at tables, with a variety of materials. What one teacher sees as student engagement in higher-level thinking and project-based learning activities may appear to another teacher as a chaotic classroom in need of better management. Similarly, teachers who receive the same policy message may interpret it in very different ways.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

Response to Intervention is a multi-tiered systematic approach to teaching and learning that is used in schools as they work to ensure that students have access to high quality instruction and interventions are available for struggling learners. RTI is most commonly depicted as a three-tier instructional model of service delivery. RTI provides a structure under which a number of evidence-based practices are employed to improve student learning. RTI has the potential for increasing the capacity of schools to meet the diverse needs of students. The research base for RTI, however, has focused on elementary school settings, and although that research can inform implementation in the middle school setting, there are several differences unique to middle schools which make complete transference of RTI research challenging because it will ultimately look different in middle schools (Johnson & Smith, 2011). This study intends to explore the perceptions and experiences of educators at one middle school. Therefore, the following literature review provides a comprehensive review of the RTI framework, its use in middle schools, and the effectiveness of implementation as a top-down initiative.

What is Response to Intervention?

RTI is an educational framework that provides a tiered system of implementing evidence-based instructional strategies in the general education setting; it includes frequently measuring student progress to determine whether given strategies are effective when a student exhibits difficulty in achieving academic growth (Canter, Klotz, & Cowan, 2008). RTI has been promoted by several professional organizations such as The National Association of Special Education Directors, the National Association of School Psychologists, the International Reading Association, and educational experts such as Douglas and Lynn Fuchs from Vanderbilt
University as a way of closing the achievement gap and improving student outcomes for at-risk students without the need for special education (Sansosti et al., 2010). RTI provides systematic, research-based interventions to meet the challenges of struggling learners, and it promotes shared responsibility and collaboration among general and special educators.

The RTI process generally involves three stages or tiers of intervention (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2007). The first tier includes universal strategies, which incorporate high quality instruction, research-based teaching strategies, and frequent monitoring of student progress to identify at-risk students in the general education setting. This requires scientifically based instruction delivered by highly qualified staff. All students are screened on a regular basis, establishing academic baselines to identify struggling learners who need support. Students identified as struggling receive differentiated instruction by the general education teacher in the general education classroom. Classroom teachers use a variety of progress monitoring tools to regularly assess student progress. Progress monitoring tools, which can be formal or informal assessments, are typically chosen by building based teams. Students who do not show adequate progress as determined by grade level benchmarks are moved to Tier 2 for more intensive interventions. Teacher efficacy in the delivery of instruction, progress monitoring, and high quality professional development in RTI topics is important for high fidelity implementation, which is needed for maximum student benefit. Tier 1 instruction requires that 80% of all students be able to make progress in the general education setting. Without strong core instruction and differentiation in Tier 1, the framework is at risk for collapse. Tier 2 and Tier 3 cannot be effective in addressing more complex needs if a large number of students require remedial intervention (Wixson, 2011).
Tier 2 is designed for students who have not made adequate progress in the general education classroom (Tier 1). Students are provided with more intensive interventions, as well as accommodations and modifications within the general education setting. Tier 2 interventions are provided to students by a specialist or interventionist, and are based on individual student need. Typically, Tier 2 interventions may include small group instruction and longer intervals of instruction on a given skill. A Tier 2 intervention is typically delivered two to three times per week and does not exceed a six- to eight-week period. Students who receive Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention continue to be serviced in the general education setting for their core instruction; Tier 2 and Tier 3 are a second “dose” of instruction. Students receive the same core instruction as their peers while remediating an identified deficit. Ideally, only 5-10% of students are referred to Tier 2. Students who continue to show little progress in Tier 2 may be referred to Tier 3 (www.rtinetwork.org).

Tier 3 addresses the needs of students who continue to display poor academic results despite strong core instruction in Tier 1 and more intensive interventions in Tier 2. Tier 3 is specialized instruction delivered by a specialist in small group or one to one instruction. Ideally, students are seen daily. Tier 3 services 3% or less of a given population. There is, however, emerging consensus in the RTI literature that suggests having three or four tiers for delivering instruction meets the needs of students (Mellard, McKnight, & Jordan, 2010).

RTI requires the restructuring of student and teacher schedules in order to incorporate time during the school day for students to receive interventions. It also requires changes in the roles and responsibilities of teachers and other specialists. Classroom teachers and other specialists such as school psychologists and other related service providers must begin to see themselves as “interventionists” who are responsible for remediating skills rather than strictly
delivering content. This is a change in how middle school teachers and other staff typically think about their current roles and responsibilities (Johnson & Smith, 2011). Systematic screening and ongoing progress monitoring is important to the implementation of RTI. A system must be developed in order to initially identify at-risk students and then maintain an ongoing system to continually monitor each student’s progress. The process may include student record reviews or previously used elementary assessments to identify at-risk students; or new tools must be identified and administered. Schools will also need to determine if all students will be assessed, or only certain students who have been previously identified. Once students have been identified, curriculum and interventions for Tier 2 and Tier 3 are also identified.

Once curriculum and interventions have been identified for each tier, the fidelity in implementing core instruction and interventions must be addressed by RTI teams. Fidelity is an integral piece of the framework. It refers to the way in which academic content and instructional strategies are delivered. Across all tiers, they must be delivered in the way in which they were designed, to ensure that the delivery of instruction and the assessments provides teams with accurate information about student learning. In order to ensure reliability, fidelity checks are routinely scheduled and analyzed with staff (Bianco, 2010).

Other considerations for implementation teams include the best way to educate and communicate RTI with parents, professional development needs of staff, and schedule changes. These and other ongoing questions, concerns, and challenges need to be addressed in order to move the framework from exploration and adoption to full implementation and sustainability. These vary from district to district and school to school. Implementation requires changes and change requires education, practice, and time to mature. This may be more or less dramatic, depending on the culture and climate.
of an organization. During the initial stages of implementation, there are inherent
difficulties, and when difficulties surface, individuals become overwhelmed. This often
becomes the end of the initiative (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005).

**Implementation of RTI Specific to Middle Schools**

Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) state that implementation of RTI for early grades is possible;
however, there is significant lack of research and evidence regarding the feasibility of RTI in
middle schools. This is because middle schools and middle school students present unique
challenges that are very different from elementary schools.

When students first enter middle school, they are confronted with multiple teachers and
an increase in curriculum demands, encompassing higher levels of problem solving and critical
thinking skills. In order to acquire the higher level content and concepts presented in middle
school, students must now rely on their foundation of basic skills learned in elementary school
(Johnson & Smith, 2011). Middle schools have different scheduling structures than elementary
schools because they are typically larger. At the elementary level, classrooms are essentially
self-contained; a single teacher has a group of students for the entire day. Teachers provide
lessons to the whole class and in small groups while weaving interventions and specific
instruction into all aspects of the curriculum. Middle schools, in contrast, have block scheduling;
teachers may not see each student every day, and there is little flexibility in scheduling for a
tiered intervention block. In addition, middle school teachers are seen as experts in their content
area and may not have knowledge or experience in strategies or interventions for struggling
learners. Middle school students who require extra learning supports are typically referred to
specialists (Brozo, 2009).
Initial research on RTI at the middle school level also suggests that pieces of the framework may need to be implemented differently due to the uniqueness of middle school structures and also because middle school students have academic needs and challenges that are different than those of elementary school students. Some of the initial research on RTI has suggested that middle school students who have been identified as at-risk academically may require more intensive or longer periods of intervention because their academic deficits have accumulated and have become more dramatic or severe over time (Fuchs et al., 2010). In addition, there is a lack of “empirically validated interventions” for students at the secondary level (Sansosti et al., 2010). These longstanding academic deficits, coupled with a lack of effective evidenced based interventions, frequently lead to low motivation and poor self-confidence, which may compromise the efficacy of the framework. Another area identified as unique to the middle school level is that older students may not require intensive universal screening. In most cases, students in middle school have already been identified as at-risk for poor academic performance. Middle school teachers, therefore, may find that it makes more sense to spend time and resources on Tier II and Tier III interventions for already identified students immediately, rather than spending time on the process of screening (Fuchs et al., 2010). These and other challenges will likely require significant changes within middle schools to ensure successful implementation and sustainability of RTI (Sansosti, Goss, & Noltemeyer, 2011). The obstacles, however, should not be viewed as justification for abandoning RTI at the middle school level, but rather seen as opportunities for positive system changes to improve student outcomes (Sansosti et al., 2010).
Response to Intervention as a Top-Down Initiative

Response to Intervention has been recognized as a national top-down educational initiative. Top-down initiatives refer to any initiative that originates from the top of an organizational structure to the bottom. For this study, top-down refers to the RTI initiative that has been initiated at the federal level and now has to be carried out at the local level. RTI has the promise of improving teaching and learning while addressing the academic needs of all students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1998), so much so that the Individuals With Disabilities Act (IDEA) and the No Child Left Behind Act contain language that support and encourage districts to implement RTI districtwide. The language of IDEA and NCLB focuses intensely on redesigning the current structures of schools in order to improve student outcomes (Holdnack & Weiss, 2006) and soon after IDEA and NCLB, schools across the US began implementing RTI, but without clear or consistent directives regarding how to implement the framework with success due to the lack of implementation research (Brozo, 2009).

Implementing federal mandates such as RTI at the local level can be challenging work. One of the biggest challenges in implementing top-down school change is ensuring that each person involved has the same interpretation of the expectation. In other words, district leaders are charged with the task of ensuring that all stakeholders understand the initiative in the same way in order to confirm that the framework is being implemented with fidelity. The difficulty with this is that each person comes to the initiative with different knowledge bases, experiences, and beliefs. Without a common understanding of the change effort, any reform will struggle to get off the ground and be sustained long term (Spillane et al, 2002).

The implementation of RTI in middle schools is complicated even further by the absence of research and the lack of documented success. The lack of research of RTI at the middle
school level leaves school leaders to develop their own interpretations and devise their own approaches to implement RTI in their buildings (Shanklin, 2008). Therefore, the success of the initiative will be impacted by how teachers and administrators work together to ensure that everyone involved experiences and understands exactly what the expectation is from national, state, and local perspectives will impact the success of the initiative.

RTI is intended to be a proactive approach to improve instruction and student learning, in contrast to current educational change, which is typically in response to immediate challenges or crises (Chen & Reigeluth, 2010). The implementation of RTI will undoubtedly require whole school reform and a restructuring of current middle school systems. Educators need to shift their thinking and delivery of instruction. How they respond will depend upon how they have interpreted the expectation of the framework and what their experience has been during the implementation process. If teacher interpretation is not aligned with that of the building and district administrators, RTI will struggle to meet the expectation of improved teaching and learning. Moreover, if teachers’ experience during the change process is negative, then teachers are less likely to follow through with implementation initiatives.

Our current educational system was designed for the ease and logistics of sorting students rather than for learning. This model was appropriate during the Industrial Age when manual labor was predominant. Now in the Information Age, the acquisition of knowledge and learning and the need to educate children to their potential is a priority. This change in the purpose of education requires fundamental restructuring in the way teachers teach and the way students learn (Chen & Reigeluth, 2010). Although the need for change in our nations’ middle schools is evident, the change process is complex and the literature is scattered regarding the best way to
implement meaningful and sustainable change, including RTI (Melville, Bartley, & Weinburg, 2012).

Those who wish to reform schools often have noble ideas, but tend to focus on the “what” of change, ignoring the “how” of change (Rogan & Addous, 2005). Sarason (1990) describes implementing change as “intellectually demanding and messy” (p. 42). Moreover, implementation has been described as meaningless without an effective plan. However, this often gets overlooked due to the realities of organizational life and the demands on educational leaders and teachers (Fullan, 1993). Yet implementation cannot be assumed or left to chance; it has to be addressed directly. There has to be a real plan for implementation to create and support change. This means appropriate infrastructure, direction from school leaders, high-quality training for teachers and administration, clear goals, data driven decision making, allocation of resources, and protection of the core mission and vision of the task (Fullan, 1993).

As Fixsen et al. (2005) state, “Implementation is a process, not an event. Implementation will not happen all at once or proceed smoothly, at least at first.” Fixsen et al. (2005) discuss the stages of implementation. The first step toward implementation is, exploration and adoption. Knowledge transfer is a process not a one-time act, at some point, acquisition of information (exploration) leads to individuals and organizations making decisions (adoption) regarding a program or initiative (Fixsen et al., 2005). It is important to note that no program or initiative will be implemented or sustained past the adoption phase without common interpretation and expectation of the outcome.

**Sensemaking and Schools’ and Educators’ Implementation of New Initiatives**

When implementing school change, many stakeholders fail to understand the importance of shared sensemaking, consensus building, and collaboration. In other words, when a new idea
is introduced, they all must share a common vision for the expectation of the initiative. Having a common interpretation and shared experience is an integral part of the implementation process as schools move forward with RTI. Having a mutual understanding of the initiative and shared experience allows stakeholders to create ownership and responsibility, and when all stakeholders share the responsibility for the success of the program, everyone works to ensure the realization of the initiative (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Katzenbach & Kahn, 2010). Without consistent interpretation from all stakeholders and without a shared sense of ownership, any reform effort such as RTI will be less likely to meet the expectation for improved educational systems and ultimately improved student outcomes (Spillane, 2009).

All educators involved in the change process must be able to suspend their beliefs and become team players in order to achieve best practices with regard to the implementation of RTI (Sanger, Friedli, Brunken, Snow, Ritzman, 2012). The implementation of a new initiative requires a shift in teacher practices and in how teachers work with their students. In order to make those kinds of changes in teacher practices, teachers must fully comprehend the expectations and be empowered to play an important role in program implementation (Pyle, Wade-Woolley, & Hutchinson, 2011). Imposed reform is unsuccessful reform, and educational leaders must build support for change by engaging in real dialogue with all parties; their understanding and support is vital. Support for a school change initiative such as RTI is not just a matter of telling people, or ordering people, but involving all stakeholders in the process (Fullan, 1993).

There is no specific template, outline, or roadmap for middle schools to follow as they design and carry out a process to implement RTI—only the theories and research supporting its implementation. The majority of prior research has been conducted at the
elementary level, and for the most part, it has centered on reading and literacy (King, Lemons, & Hill, 2012). As educational entities that choose to embrace RTI's premise, theories, and supporting research as a structure for systems change will at times be faced with new and different challenges (Dulaney, 2012).

Full implementation occurs when new learning becomes fully integrated into practitioner, organization, and community. At this point, the implemented program becomes fully operational. In other words, how an organization “does business,” where the initiative becomes accepted practice, and the anticipated benefits are realized (Fixsen et al., 2005). The implementation of a new program presents an opportunity to learn about an organization and improve upon the practices in place. This is known as the innovation phase of implementation. Innovation changes are desirable changes made to the original model. Any change to the original model must be observed over time to determine if the innovation has merit and adds overall benefit to the program (Fixsen et al., 2005).

Sustainability of a new program is not typically realized until 2-4 years after initial implementation. The goal during the innovation stage is long-term survival and continued effectiveness of the program in the context of the changing landscape of education. Teachers and leaders come and go; new staff are trained and replace old staff. Leadership, funding sources, and program requirements change; new problems arise. Leaders and teachers must continually be aware of these inevitable changes and adjust, so they don’t lose the functional components of the program or allow it to die in the face of changing or competing initiatives from new stakeholders (Fixsen et al., 2005).
Exploration and Adoption
   ↓
Program Installation
   ↓
Initial implementation
   ↓
Full Operation
   ↓
Innovation
   ↓
Sustainability

Figure 1. Stages of Implementation Process

Researchers agree that RTI reflects a substantive systems change that is not possible without totally reforming the way in which middle schools deliver instruction (Wiener, 2008). Substantive systematic change in education commonly encounters challenges in moving from possibility to implementation. Pragmatic issues specific to implementation are critically important to a successful change initiative such as RTI, and have been poorly studied in the literature examining school change. Moreover, there remains a disconnect between effective practices and program implementation. As Noell and Gansel (2009) state, “It is much easier to talk about behavior change than it is to accomplish it” (p. 78). Middle school teachers and educational leaders will inevitably have to conduct their classrooms and schools in a different
fashion if they are to expect different outcomes (Noell & Gansel, 2008). This, however, is profoundly challenging, given the deeply embedded environmental systems and ridged structures of schools (Witt, 1990). Without a common understanding of what teachers are being asked to do, it is unlikely that RTI will ever make a difference in student learning.

**Summary**

RTI is a promising educational framework with the potential to improve teaching and learning. The implementation of RTI, however, is complex and can be intellectually demanding and messy (Sarason, 1990). Moreover, those responsible for the application of RTI often do not take into account the context in which it is being applied and the number of variables that will affect the process. Studies are unlikely to yield the same findings, due to the large number of variables that contribute to success. Therefore, researchers will continually need to examine a variety of conditions under which RTI is most successful. At that time, researchers will be able to identify common elements to guide schools in the successful implementation of RTI within their individual context. Through this research, she hopes to gain a better understanding of how middle school educators have perceived the district’s expectation for RTI and what their experiences have been during implementation. She hopes to gain insight into potential steps that will move RTI from the initial stages of implementation to innovation and sustainability (Fixsen et al., 2005).
Chapter III: Research Design

Study Context

The study was conducted in a large suburban middle school of 980 students in southeastern Massachusetts, approximately 50 miles south of Boston. The middle school is broken into three houses. Each house contains students in grades six, seven, and eight, and consists of teachers from all major subject content areas (math, science, English and social studies). In addition, each house has two special education teachers assigned to each grade level, an assistant principal, and a guidance counselor.

The district has been establishing a climate and culture for RTI since 2012 by providing multiple professional development opportunities to district and building administrators, teachers, and support staff; yet after a program review was conducted, there was little evidence to suggest that RTI has progressed from discussion to implementation. It is the belief of this researcher that RTI has stalled because building level administrators and teachers have different interpretations of what RTI would “look like” at the middle school level and how to implement it; and that those who are responsible for implementation are unclear about the expectations. The John Quincy Adams (JQA) Middle School will offer the researcher an environment that will provide strong data, offering insight into the research questions, which in turn will contribute to the body of research regarding the implementation of RTI in middle schools.

Research Methodology, Design, and Tradition

This study seeks to gain a better understanding of how middle school educators in one school district have interpreted the expectation for the implementation of RTI. In addition, it seeks to understand what the experiences of middle school educators have been regarding the implementation of RTI. The purpose of the study is to better understand the implementation
process of RTI through the lens of teachers and administrators. An understanding of potential barriers may assist teachers and administrators in moving the framework from the exploration and adoption phase to implementation and eventually full implementation, where innovation and sustainability are fully realized (Fixsen et al., 2005).

The research design for this study is a qualitative case study. A qualitative case study seeks to contribute to our knowledge of a complex social phenomenon. The intent of a qualitative case study is that it “expected to catch the complexity of a single case” (Stake, 1995) in an attempt to clarify a set of decisions, the manner in which those decisions were implemented, and the result (Schramm, 1971). It allows the researcher to glean meaning from real-life events (Yin, 2011). This qualitative case study will contribute to our knowledge of RTI implementation specific to middle schools. It is the most appropriate design and methodology, given the context of the study.

The research tradition for this study is a qualitative case study, using focus groups, individual interviews, and a review of pertinent documents. A qualitative case study develops an in-depth description and analysis of a single case. It involves the study of a given issue within a bounded system in which an investigator explores a case through detailed, in-depth data collection using multiple sources of information such as focus groups, interviews, and document reviews. A case study is exploratory in nature and attempts to investigate a given phenomenon within a real life context (Yin, 2011). The study explored the perspectives of middle school educators regarding their interpretation of the school district’s expectation for the implementation of an RTI framework and examined their personal experiences during an RTI reform effort at JQA Middle School.
Participants

The target samples for this study are district and building based administrators, general education teachers, and special education inclusion teachers in the middle school. School administrators have always been recognized as important within the organizational change process. Leo and Wickenberg (2013) describe building principals as “change agents” and “culture builders,” making the principals’ role paramount in school change. More recent studies, however, have placed significant emphasis on the participation of teachers during reform efforts, stating that any reform will struggle due to lack of teacher “buy in” during reform efforts (Dulaney, 2012). School improvement is based on a shared commitment, and systematic change involving all stakeholders is critical. For these reasons, district and building administrators and teachers participated in interviews and focus groups in order to provide insight into the research questions.

Data collection comprised individual interviews, focus groups, and a review of pertinent documents (Appendix I). Administrators were asked to produce any documents that they feel are pertinent to the research study and questions. Each document was reviewed and logged using Appendix I. Documents relative to RTI implementation were reviewed for information that is significant to the research questions. The following administrators were asked to participate in individual interviews: the assistant superintendent of schools, building principal, assistant principal, special education department head, and school psychologist. Individual interviews were conducted with administrators, rather than placing them in focus groups with teachers, due to their evaluative role within the district. The presence of administrators within the focus groups may have caused teachers to hesitate or answer differently. This allowed teachers the
opportunity to speak openly during focus groups among peers, allowing for more authentic
dialogue (Appendix G).

One focus group was held with seven educators. Focus groups use the element of natural
human conversation to help participants retrieve stored information in their memories, creating
cognitive triggers, which add to the data and insight (Patton, 2002). The focus group yielded
good results due to participant familiarity and shared experience (Creswell, 2007). The
researcher served as the facilitator, asking a series of open-ended questions (Appendix G) and
additional probes to guide and facilitate the group conversation as a way to gain insight into the
research questions. In order to maximize the focus group dynamic, the researcher used a strong
discussion guide, familiar environment, and a skilled moderator who is familiar with the topic
and has strong facilitation skills (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013).

**Recruitment and Access**

IRB approval was obtained in January 2016, prior to engaging potential participants. The
researcher accessed potential participants with the permission of the superintendent and the
building principal. Potential participants were addressed during a faculty meeting in which the
researcher gave a brief overview of the study. At the conclusion of the faculty meeting, an initial
recruitment letter was handed out to teachers (Appendices C & D). The initial recruitment letter
discussed the purpose and importance of the study as well as the general format for data
collection and study expectations. Those who were interested in participating in the study were
asked to email the researcher directly. Approximately two days following the faculty meeting,
the researcher sent an email probe to ask for participants. Those who responded to the initial
faculty meeting request or the email probe received a formal study application with a detailed
description of the study and participant consent form (Appendix C). The participation consent
form discussed the following ethical considerations for participation: avoiding deception, privacy/confidentiality, potential risk, potential benefit, comfort during the study, and options/process to discontinue the study (Yin, 2009). Participants who volunteered to continue with the study after they had received and read the participation consent were asked to sign, complete, and return the study application to the researcher. The application asked for basic information from teachers and administrators such as number of years as an educator and certification areas. Because only seven teachers responded to the focus group request, one focus group was held after school hours on March 7, 2016 in the conference room at JQA Middle School. Individual interviews were scheduled at the convenience of those being interviewed and were held in personal office spaces throughout the district.

**Data Collection and Storage**

The focus group was conducted in a conference room located at JQA Middle School. The conference room allowed for sufficient space and comfort, as well as offering privacy and minimal distractions (Guest et al., 2013). All focus group and individual interview sessions were recorded using the Rev.com “app” on the researcher’s personal iPhone. The audio transcription was then uploaded to Rev.com transcription services and was transcribed verbatim. Information and data collected during the study was kept in a locked storage unit inside the researcher’s locked office. All recordings, transcripts or other documents was destroyed upon completion of the defense of this research. No one other than the participants and researcher had access to any of the information regarding participants or any data collected.

**Data Analysis**

The goal of data triangulation is to seek the validity of findings by way of at least three different sources of data regarding a particular phenomenon (Yin, 2011). This study consists of
the following data collection strategies to triangulate the data: three focus groups, several individual interviews, and a document review.

The data transcriptions from focus groups and individual interviews was put through first cycle and second cycle coding (Saldaña, 2009). In vivo coding was used during the first coding cycle. In vivo coding, also known as “literal coding,” refers to words or short phrases that are found within the data from the transcriptions where recurring words or phrases begin to reveal emerging themes. During in vivo coding cycles, the researcher used a variety of colored highlighters to keep track of emerging themes, trends, and patterns to formulate tentative conclusions (Saldaña, 2009).

The second cycle of coding is a more advanced way of organizing and analyzing data. Pattern coding was the method of second cycle coding used in this study. Pattern coding helps to identify emergent themes, configurations, and explanations. Pattern coding was employed after using first cycle coding to identify and further develop the major emerging themes while relying on “insight, intuition, and impressions” (Dey, 1995, p. 78) to draw conclusions in relationship to the research questions (Saldaña, 2009). The themes relative to each research question are provided and discussed in the presentation of findings in chapter four.

Trustworthiness

This research applied Yin’s four criteria for judging the trustworthiness and validity of case studies in quality research: construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability (Yin, 2011).

This study used multiple sources of evidence: focus groups, individual interviews, and record reviews. Key informants were asked to review a draft of the case study report to insure reliability and accuracy of reporting. A logical chain of evidence was established in order to
provide validity to the findings. The researcher conducted intense data analysis of each transcription after both the first and second cycles of coding. The triangulation of data helps to improve the study’s ability to be generalized beyond the immediate case.

The researcher based the study upon sound theory in order to provide a framework for transferability and reliability, allowing other researchers to arrive at the same findings and conclusions should they follow the same procedures. The goal of reliability is to minimize researcher biases and follow precise procedures and protocols. The researcher acknowledges the potential for bias, given that the researcher and the participants are employed by the same school district in which the research took place. However, in an effort to reduce bias on the part of the researcher as much as possible, findings were carefully reviewed, keeping in mind the potential for bias, and attempts were made to identify and present all findings based on the evidence collected during the study. In addition, preliminary findings were presented to two additional colleagues for alternative explanations and points of view in order to provide the researcher with different perspectives to consider when analyzing data (Yin, 2011).

Summary

This study employs a qualitative case study in order to explore how middle school educators have interpreted and experienced the district’s expectation for the implementation of RTI while also examining potential implementation steps. Participants are educators from one middle school. They were asked to volunteer for the study via faculty meeting and email after IRB approval was obtained from Northeastern University on January 28, 2016. Data was collected via teacher focus group, administrative one to one interviews, and a review of relevant documents. Data was recorded and transcribed using Rev.com transcription services. Once written transcripts were received, they were printed and coded. The coding of the transcripts was
then analyzed and reported, using rich, detailed narrative to capture the accounts of teachers and administrators regarding the implementation process of RTI in one middle school.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

Introduction

Chapter four presents the findings of this qualitative case study, which was conducted to seek a better understanding of how middle school administrators and educators have interpreted the district’s expectation of an RTI initiative, their perceptions regarding the current status of RTI at the school, and how RTI might be improved upon at the school. This chapter will restate the research questions, discuss key findings from the research, and conclude with a thematic analysis.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. How have building administrators and educators at JQA Middle School interpreted the district’s expectations for the implementation of RTI?

2. What are the perceptions of building administrators and educators at JQA Middle School regarding the school’s current state of RTI?

3. What do building administrators and educators believe could improve the current state of RTI at JQA Middle School?

As discussed in previous chapters, RTI is a tiered educational instructional model that has been promoted by national organizations such as The National Association of State Special Education Directors, National Association of School Psychologists and the International Reading Association as an intervention blueprint intended to improve teaching and learning by adding additional support systems for students through the implementation of general education interventions (www.doe.mass.edu/mtss/blueprint.html). However, the effective implementation of top down reform efforts such as RTI has proven difficult. Local implementation can be
challenging when key elements during the implementation process are overlooked. One of the key elements to the successful implementation of top down reform efforts such as RTI is that each individual who plays a role in the implementation process must have a clear and consistent message from those who are initiating the reform effort. If stakeholders have different interpretations of RTI and different ideas of what is expected from district and building administrators regarding the framework and its implementation (Spillane at al, 2002) the differences in perceived interpretations and expectations impacts the fidelity of the implementation process and often leads to implementation failure (Spillane et al, 2002).

Changing the current instructional framework of today’s classrooms is especially important, given that American students are not learning or acquiring the knowledge and skills that they need to in order to be successful in today’s world (NAEP, 2001). Moreover, our students are lagging behind their peers in most other industrialized nations (OECD, 2010). It is especially important to look at the delivery of instruction and the framework for learning in middle schools because middle school represents a critical point in a student’s academic career, laying the foundation for successful completion of high school (Morris, Ehren & Lenz, 1991). RTI has been cited by educational experts as an educational delivery model that has the potential to redesign and reconceptualize teaching and learning. Research shows that RTI can support student learning and improve instruction. The research in the area of RTI implementation in middle schools is sparse, yet it is critical, given the need to close the achievement gap earlier. Middle schools play an important role in laying the groundwork for post high school success (Balfanz, 2009).
Study Site, Participants, and Data Collection

The Pine Hills School district in southeastern Massachusetts has been establishing a culture and climate for RTI since 2012. This research seeks to gain an understanding of the perceptions of building administrators and educators in one of the district’s two middle schools regarding the district’s expectation of the implementation of RTI, the current state of RTI, and approaches to improve the current state of RTI at JQA Middle School.

All of the participants for this study are current district administrators, building administrators, general education teachers, special education teachers, and teacher coaches at JQA Middle School. Administrators and those who have evaluative roles within the school participated in one to one interviews. There were five, one to one interviews with a variety of administrators. All of the administrators appeared comfortable and answered all of the researcher’s questions without reservation. Interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participants and all were conducted in small office spaces located within the middle school.

Teachers and teacher coaches participated in a focus group. This was scheduled by the researcher and was conducted in a conference room at JQA Middle School. The focus group permitted teachers to speak openly among peers, which allowed for a more authentic dialogue, harnessing the element of natural human conversation. The group dynamic helped participants recollect information stored, by creating cognitive triggers caused by group dynamics (Patton, 2002). The focus group consisted of seven teachers from JQA Middle School: three special education teachers, a math teacher, a science teacher, and the math and literacy specialists. The collective group was extremely experienced in the field of education, with a combined number of 100 years of teaching between them. The focus group conversation was lively and robust; the teachers were excited to participate and they answered all of the questions thoughtfully and
completely during the 45-minute session. The teachers appeared comfortable and answered all of the questions easily and definitively, which led the researcher to believe that the group had a good understanding of the research topic.

Participants were also asked to provide documents they felt were relative to the study. The documents were reviewed and logged using Appendix I. They were then analyzed for relevance and importance to the research questions.

Collectively, all of the participants discussed elements within the boundaries of the implementation of RTI within their school. Each session was recorded and transcribed using Rev.com. Each data point (interviews, focus group, and document review) was coded and analyzed for trends and patterns that were relative the research questions and then reported using tables and narrative form.

The key findings from this research was reported using the following structure: Tables 1 and 2 present the individual interview and focus group participants. Tables 3-5 present emerging themes based on the research questions followed by a narrative. The document review is presented in narrative form followed by a summary of findings.

Table 1

*Individual Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Current Role</th>
<th>Years in current role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>Assistant Principal (one of three)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>School Psychologist</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheri</td>
<td>Special Education Department Head</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brendan</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carson</td>
<td>Assistant Superintendent</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Focus Group Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Current Role</th>
<th>Years in Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cathleen</td>
<td>Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzanne</td>
<td>Science Teacher</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leeann</td>
<td>Math Specialist</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reggie</td>
<td>Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean</td>
<td>Literacy Specialist</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>Math Teacher</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research Question 1: How Have Building Level Administrators and Educators at one Middle School Interpreted the District’s Expectation for the Implementation RTI?

The first research question seeks to provide context relative to the study. In order for us to understand the responses from staff at the building level regarding the current state of RTI, they must first understand what the expectation was and is from the district’s perspective. Then they can determine if there is alignment from the top (district) down (building and classroom). This research question provides information and clarity regarding the district’s expectation for the implementation of RTI, and provides insight regarding whether or not the district’s expectation has been interpreted consistently at the building level. Clarity between district and building level expectations is paramount if RTI is expected to move from initiation to implementation. If there is a disconnect between district expectations and how those
expectations are interpreted at the building level, RTI would rarely meet the expectation to improve student outcomes. Therefore, before examining how the expectation has been interpreted at the building level, it was important to examine how the original directive to implement RTI at JQA Middle School was understood and interpreted at the building level.

Table 3

Themes that emerged from the Question: How have building administrators and educators at JQA Middle School interpreted the district's expectation for RTI?

The Pine Hills School district set a districtwide expectation for the implementation of RTI in grades K-8. However, the district lacked in communicating the specific steps required to reach implementation.

Pine Hills School District Set a Districtwide Expectation for the Implementation of RTI in Grades K-8. However, the District Lacked in Communicating the Specific Steps Required to Reach Implementation. Consistently, participants stated that they understood the districtwide expectation for RTI to be implemented at each K-8 building across the district. In each of the five interviews and in the focus group, participants clearly stated that RTI was expected. In my interview with the Assistant Superintendent Carson, he stated that the district does have an expectation for RTI to be implemented at the building level. He continued to state “that the district expects each building to tailor RTI to the unique needs of the building.” He fully acknowledged that there was more work to do, especially at the middle school level. He further acknowledged that there had been new staff added over the last few years who did not participate in the professional development offered in the district previously. As a result, Carson said he would like to see the “assistant principals become more involved in the process and have a better understanding of RTI.” Lastly, Carson stated that the administration needs to be more
clear and consistent with what the district expected, and if they did, that “we could be pretty successful” in implementing RTI across the district. Carson acknowledged that there was clearly work to do on behalf of the RTI initiative. However, he felt that the district’s expectation had been clear regarding the directive for all schools within the district to implement an RTI framework. This information is relevant to the study because without a common understanding among building stakeholders, RTI is unlikely to improve teaching and learning. District leadership is charged with ensuring that building level administration understands district initiatives, and the administrators must in turn ensure that district and building initiatives are implemented in individual classrooms. Implementation of large scale organizational change such as an RTI initiative is extremely difficult because RTI requires whole school reform. RTI cannot be implemented without an effective plan in which nothing is left to individual interpretations. Fixen et al. (2005), state that any initiative will not be sustained past the adoption phase without common interpretation and expectation of the end product.

Amelia is one of three assistant principals at JQA Middle School. She stated that “there is an overall impression at JQA Middle School that there is a districtwide expectation for RTI.” Ellen, the school psychologist, said that “RTI is definitely talked about.” She went on to say, “when I was hired, and even as recently as our last admin. and guidance meeting it (RTI) was an agenda item.” In general, she felt that RTI is “something the administration wants to implement. I just think there are some barriers to it…people get bogged down by the logistics of it.” Brendan, the building principal, stated that the district expects RTI to be implemented. He stated that “there has been professional development money and time allocated for the implementation of RTI. However, it primarily focused on Tier 1 and nothing ever came of it.” He went on to say that “teachers are looking for that next level of training to support kids.”
It was evident in my interviews that the district’s vision is to implement RTI was clear from the top down. There was no question that RTI was expected from the district. Teachers and administrators alike all stated that their perception was that the district wanted RTI to be implemented at the building level. This was evident during conversations and agenda items, and because RTI has been a focus of the professional development topics within the building over the last four years, as reported by study participants.

It appears from the data collected during this study that the vision for RTI is shared across administrative tiers, into the building, and throughout classrooms. However, although the vision for RTI is clear across district and building stakeholders, what seem to be unclear across participants are the specific steps required to move the initiative from exploration and adoption to implementation at the building level.

**Research Question 2: What Are the Perceptions of Building Administrators and Educators Regarding the Current State of RTI at John Quincy Adams Middle School?**

The second research question seeks to detail the perceptions of building administrators and educators regarding the current state of RTI at JQA Middle School. In each of the five interviews and the focus group, participants clearly stated that RTI was expected. However, how RTI was to be pursued was not made clear and was not specific. Therefore, despite the clarity of the district’s expectation across participants, the evidence suggests that there are different perspectives regarding the current state of RTI at JQA Middle School. Many participants reported that RTI, in its current state, is struggling to meet the needs of the students at JQA Middle School. One teacher reported, “we are having a difficult time with RTI…it is very disjointed…there is no system and a lot of loose ends.”
Table 4

Themes that emerged from the Question: What are the perceptions of building administrators and educators at one middle school regarding the current state of RTI at JQA Middle School?

Although there is consensus across the study that RTI is expected, RTI at JQA Middle School has failed to move beyond the initial stages of development.

The overall perception of administrators and teachers at JQA Middle School is that RTI in its current state is not meeting the needs of the students for two primary reasons:

A. General education teachers have many responsibilities, leaving little time in their schedule to be responsible for RTI.

B. There is a lack of clarity regarding who is responsible for RTI.

Although there is consensus across the study that RTI is expected, RTI at JQA Middle School has failed to move beyond the initial stages of development. JQA Middle School began initial implementation of RTI four years ago and there is little evidence to suggest that RTI as currently executed has moved beyond the initial stage of discussion and exploration. Teachers and administrators alike expressed frustration regarding the current state of RTI at JQA Middle School. Teachers appeared to be the most frustrated when discussing the current state of RTI. One teacher stated that RTI is essentially “nonexistent.”

The teachers in the focus group stated that the district has provided a lot of professional development related to RTI, but they also said that, “nothing ever came of it,” and “RTI was never taken to the next level.” This demonstrates that, from the teachers’ perspective, the RTI initiative has not moved forward in relation to implementation in the four years since it was introduced as a district initiative.

Amelia, the assistant principal, stated that “they have never been given a clear set of guidelines regarding how it should be implemented.” Ellen, the school psychologist, said that,
“It is something the administration wants to implement. I just think there are some barriers to it…people get bogged down by the logistics of it.” Carson, the assistant superintendent, added, “its presence is incomplete (referring to RTI). We have a lot more work to do in terms of the administrative part.” He specifically stated that the assistant principals need additional training so that they’ll have a better understanding of RTI. Carson commented that there have been “some positive shifts in instructional practices over the years” and “we definitely need to put more energy into [RTI] at the middle school, because we haven’t.”

These comments demonstrate that because the district’s vision is unclear, there is a disconnect between vision and implementation. Ellen, the school psychologist, stated that “RTI cannot be a grassroots movement.” In other words, RTI requires a system, process, and leadership if it is to be implemented with success. Schools cannot simply hope for RTI to happen; any change initiative requires carefully planned and frequently monitored implementation steps in order to ensure success and sustainability.

The overall perception of administrators and teachers at JQA Middle School is that RTI in its current state is not meeting the needs of the students for two primary reasons. First, general education teachers have a lot of responsibility, and therefore they have little time to dedicate to the RTI initiative; and second, teachers reported that there is a lack of clarity regarding who is responsible for the initiative. Both of these will be discussed in detail below.

General education teachers have many responsibilities. Teachers within the focus group stated that they feel overwhelmed by the current demands put on them as educators, and do not feel qualified to implement interventions. As one teacher stated, “RTI isn’t as good as it could be because you don’t have time to plan.” Cheri, the special education department head,
shared the concern of the teachers, saying that “teachers are overwhelmed with the amount of curriculum they have to teach.”

Brendan, the principal, further supported what Cheri and the teachers said about the high demands being put on teachers, saying that “we are expecting a lot from teachers right now. Teachers want to help students, but RTI is a difficult process because of the data collection and revisiting of interventions to determine what has worked and what has not.” Ellen stated that “teachers right now do not have the time to do anything other than teach what they are teaching.”

In general, participants felt that a lot is being asked of our teachers and that they have many responsibilities. Participants also felt that teachers cannot solely be responsible for the RTI initiative. Ellen stated that in order for RTI to be successful, it would require some restructuring and reallocating of staff. “It would require restructuring and just looking at the problem differently. It extends to using the guidance counselors, adjustment counselors, assistant principals, and myself differently.”

*Lack of clarity and leadership regarding who is responsible for RTI.* Teachers feel that RTI requires more direction and clarity from building and district leadership. Overall, Teachers felt that “there is ambiguity of who is in charge, and there is no formal process for RTI.” Teachers stated that they rarely see administrators at their professional collaboration time (PCT). As a result, teachers are not clear about who makes the decisions about “what should happen for students.” While teachers reported that professional collaboration time (PCT) is built into their schedule with the intent to provide teachers with an opportunity to co-plan and discuss students, they reported that there is no fidelity or consistency to when or how PCT time is utilized across the building. As one teacher stated, PCT “is well intentioned but with all the IEP, 504, and parent meetings, we are lucky to meet once every seven-eight days and at that time we are doing
damage control; there is no continuity. When we are able to meet there is nothing formal, no documentation of what has been tried or what is helping.”

In general, teachers felt frustrated with the lack of direction and clarity related to RTI. They stated that RTI feels “disjointed.” Katie, a special education teacher said “there is no system for tracking, no protocol, no paperwork, and no intervention happening.” Teachers repeatedly said that they would appreciate direction and guidance from administrators. They feel that they do not know who is “in charge” of RTI, and as a result, JQA Middle School is seeing minimal or no positive effects from the initiative.

**Research Question 3: What do Building Administrators and Educators at JQA Middle School Believe Could Improve the Current State of RTI?**

Research question 3 seeks to explore the perceptions of building administrators and educators regarding potential changes that may improve the current state of RTI at JQA Middle School. Currently, teachers are frustrated and overwhelmed by RTI because although there is clearly an expectation to implement RTI, the initiative lacks clarity, direction, structure, and additional training. The following suggestions (Table 5) were consistently discussed among the stakeholders who participated in this research.
Teachers and administrators believe that the current schedule does not support RTI and should be redesigned.

Teachers and administrators identified the need for additional resources in order to implement Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions.

In order for RTI to improve teaching and learning, JQA Middle School needs to develop a process for RTI and assign responsibility for implementing the process with fidelity.

**Teachers and Administrators Believe that the Current Schedule Does Not Support RTI.** A consistent theme across all of the interviews and the focus group was that the current schedule at JQA Middle School hindered the implementation of RTI. Leeann, the math specialist, stated that “the schedule is a fiasco.”

Across all of the interviews and the focus group, the current schedule was a real source of angst. The current schedule is seven periods and each class meets for 49 minutes. Most of the participants felt that the schedule was too rigorous for most students. Amelia stated the following when she was asked to speak about the current schedule: “Students do not have time during their day to receive any specific support. Students take six academic classes, which I think is almost unheard of. I mean, even at the high school level they don’t take six academic classes.” Brendan also referenced the rigor of the schedule and the high standards that are expected of middle school students. He stated that “eighth grade students are taking two high school level courses…they are taking algebra one and a foreign language…That is where I think
we lose a lot of kids.” Ellen stated that the current schedule did not promote a tiered system of support for students.

Kids are scheduled just really tightly….Kids need a study hall….They are expected to take a foreign language and they really need core instruction….Our kids are lacking in social emotional skills, executive functioning skills and in independence….Maybe that’s something that could be addressed in middle school during an intervention block….We don’t always get the opportunity to do that in middle school….We are not addressing those foundations.

Several participants mentioned the need for an intervention block to be added during the school day. Brendan reported,

our classes are 49 minutes in theory. By the time kids get into class, it’s like 45 minutes. Teachers feel rushed. I would love to see a schedule that gives teachers an extra 10-15 minutes to check in with kids and work individually with them. We need to extend our blocks and add a floating intervention block for students to meet with teachers or specialists. I don’t know exactly what it would look like at the middle school level, but I think that is what we are missing.

The assistant superintendent also discussed the need to reexamine the current schedule in order to implement Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. He stated,

I would like to see us change the schedule so that we could actually have a block built in to the schedule of those kids who need Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions where they could get it during the day without pulling them out of other classes.

Currently, if students require a specialized service to meet their special education needs, they miss an elective class. Teachers felt this was unfair, and reported that often parents do not
want their child to miss elective opportunities that are often a favorite part of a student’s day. One teacher participant stated, “whether or not a student has access to supports depends on their schedule, and students shouldn’t have to choose. It’s currently a one-size-fits-all model. If a student has band or chorus, they cannot access math pull-out.”

The teacher focus group especially disliked the idea that teachers still had duties as part of their schedules, such as sitting outside bathrooms or in hallways. One of the focus group participants stated, “shouldn’t we be talking about and seeing students—not sitting outside bathrooms?” Teachers felt that this time could be better used to service students. They also thought this time could be used to meet with the math or literacy specialist. The literacy specialist stated that the current practice is that teachers “seek her out,” and “there is no schedule of when she sees teachers.”

For nearly all teachers and building administrators, the schedule seemed to be a source of frustration. Consistently, participants reported that the current schedule does not meet the need of student or teachers.

**Teachers and Administrators Identified the Need for Additional Resources in Order to Implement Tier 2 and Tier 3 Interventions and Improve the current state of RTI.**

During several interviews and in the focus group it was discussed that JQA Middle School did not have any Tier 2 or Tier 3 options for students who were struggling. In most instances, participants stated that special education was the “go to” intervention. There were several different ideas about what “more resources” could look like at JQA Middle School. Several staff members felt as though there was enough staff, but that in order to implement RTI effectively, roles and responsibilities would have to be redefined and reallocated. Others, however, felt that there was a need for additional staffing.
Ellen believed that staff could be used more effectively in order to provide more Tier 2 interventions. She suggested utilizing the math and language coaches differently. She stated that currently they are primarily used as teacher coaches for staff professional development. She felt that it might be more efficient for them to provide direct instruction and intervention to students in order to add a second tier of instruction. Ellen also stated that classroom teachers could be used in a different capacity. “In districts that I think have done it fairly well, teachers are not only being used as classroom instructors but also as intervention instructors.” Cheri, however, felt that teachers already had large caseloads and that by asking them to also implement interventions would be asking them to take on too much. Cheri felt that they would need additional staffing in order to make RTI work. When the researcher asked if special education teachers could take some students into their academic support group, she said that their caseload was too large and that the needs of the students already in those groupings were too intense to add additional students.

Brendan stated that RTI in its current state is strictly at a Tier 1 level, and that in order to implement Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions, the school would need additional resources. He specifically stated that additional resources might include a universal screening tool, or additional staffing to meet the demands of RTI. Brendan believes that the district recognizes that there are not many interventions or resources available at the middle school level. Carson also acknowledged that there was a lack of interventions; however, he felt that JQA Middle School had the staffing and the expertise to implement RTI. With some additional professional development in order to increase teacher buy-in, improve the knowledge base of the assistant principals, and develop a more formal process, RTI could be successful. Ellen also acknowledged the strong skill sets of the current staffing, stating, “we have trained teachers;
there is a lot of talent here. Maybe they need more training in specific interventions, but I don’t think we need to hire people to do jobs that our current staff can already do.”

The teachers’ focus group felt that they needed more special education teachers in order to provide the kind of intense support the students needed. They discussed the possibility of a diagnostic model in which teachers are hired specifically for testing and report writing. This model, according to the teachers, frees up time in the schedules of other special education teachers, allowing them to see more students. One teacher stated, “we just need more special education people; I have an aide one period a day, but that doesn’t cover half the kids that I have on IEPs. Kids don’t have science disabilities; they have reading and math. But it impacts them”

In general, although many of the participants said they needed additional resources, there were discrepancies regarding what those resources are. While some thought that just redesigning and reallocating current staffing would be enough, others felt that additional staffing and additional training specific to interventions and RTI processes would be needed in order to implement all the pieces RTI requires.

In order for RTI to improve teaching and learning, JQA Middle School needs to develop a process for RTI and assign responsibility for implementing the process with fidelity. One of the biggest frustrations that teachers expressed was the need for a system to support students and teachers. Suzanne, the science teacher stated “RTI needs a system, it needs to be organized, and there needs to be a process.” During the focus group, teachers reported that a few years ago there was a school psychologist who was assigned to “running RTI. It was her baby.” However, “when she left the district, no one was rehired to take her place. Therefore, what little was left of RTI fell apart.” Leann reported that “there is an expectation that ‘the specialists can do this and they can do that,’ but I can’t follow through because I don’t know
what they are expecting.” It is not clear to the teachers whose responsibility it is to facilitate RTI within the building and the expectations are vague. Jean, the literacy specialist stated, “there is a complete ambiguity of who is in charge of what. I feel like unless there is a protocol, it is hard to know who to go to or who to address if there is an issue.”

In several instances throughout the study, staff members of JQA Middle School discussed their frustration with the current use of Professional collaboration time (PCT). Professional collaboration time was built into teachers’ schedules when the schedules were developed and implemented about eight years ago. It was intended as a common planning time or a time to discuss students. Brendan said that professional collaboration time (PCT) is run by the assistant principals and is part of every teacher’s schedule. They are scheduled to meet every other day. He stated that the assistant principals “pull in” the guidance counselor, school psychologist, or school nurse if needed during that time, to discuss students. He continued, “it’s complicated” because “they are not all free at the same time.” New paragraph: This was in contrast to how the teachers viewed PCT.

The teacher focus group was extremely vocal, and their view of how PCT is currently run was very different from the perception of the principal. The teachers stated that they were frustrated with PCT mainly because it is not implemented consistently. Leann stated that, “PCT time is well intentioned but with all the IEP, 504, and parent meetings, we are lucky to meet once every seven or eight days, and at that time we are doing damage control. Suzanne stated,

There is no continuity. PCT is poorly defined and poorly enforced. When PCT time does happen, there is formal documentation of what has been tried or what is helping. There is no process for referring students or keeping track.
Another frustration expressed by teachers was the lack of knowing who is responsible for RTI. Teachers stated that the assistant principals do not attend PCT meetings regularly and therefore if there is a recommendation that needs administrative support or approval, teachers do not really know whom to ask. “There is real ambiguity regarding who is in charge and who to go to when a student needs help.” Teachers would like to see more involvement from the administrators during PCT time in order to provide structure and to help make decisions. Teachers felt strongly that PCT time should be part of the administrator’s schedule in order to increase accountability and to be able to answer questions about possible interventions. Teachers also felt that they do not have the authority to make some of the decisions that are required as part of those meetings, and as a result, Leanne said “nothing is happening for students.”

There also appears to be a lack of role clarity among the math and literacy coaches. JQA employs a math coach (Leanne) and a literacy coach (Jean), and both coaches participated in the teacher focus group. The math and literacy coach both stated that they believed they were hired to fulfill the role of an interventionist as part of an RTI framework. However, they had never had formal training in how to run data teams, how to interpret data, or how to put interventions in place in order to improve student outcomes. They also reported that when they were hired, they did not receive clear instructions on exactly what the expectation of their role was. This is evident by how different the roles of the math and literacy coaches are. The math coach reported that she sees students in small groups for interventions and that the groups are developed by teacher recommendation, test scores, and current student performance. The literacy coach stated that she does not see students, but that her role as she defines it is strictly working with teachers regarding curriculum and lesson planning.
There seems to be a perception from building administration that RTI is running more cohesively than the teachers reported. Teachers reported that there is not a consistent process or structure in place to support RTI. Professional collaboration time, although well intended, seems to be implemented inconsistently throughout the building. In addition, without consistent participation by integral team members at PCT meetings, there is no fidelity in the implementation of any interventions.

**Document Review**

The following documents were reviewed in order to add depth to the research:

- a copy of the current middle school schedule,
- a PowerPoint presentation that was presented during a school committee to launch RTI within the district, and used for professional development during the initial launch of RTI
- the district’s current Curriculum Accommodation Plan (CAP)

This section will discuss each of the documents and its importance and relevance to the research questions.

**The middle school schedule.** A copy of the middle school schedule was reviewed. This document was relevant because several participants discussed the need to examine the current schedule. They stated that it does not support RTI, in that it does not provide opportunities for students to obtain academic support from teachers during the school day. In addition, several participants stated that the schedule is too rigorous for middle school students. In observing the schedule, it does appear that it is complex and will not meet the needs of students and teachers if RTI is to be implemented. The schedule confirmed what participants stated during interviews and focus groups. Academic blocks are only 47 minutes in length, and students do not have an
extended amount of time in homeroom or intervention time built in during their day. Students are currently scheduled for seven classes, and only special education students can access academic support classes. Furthermore, in accessing these supports, they would need to miss an elective course. This creates an inequity among students.

The district curriculum accommodation plan (CAP). The district curriculum accommodation plan (CAP) was reviewed by the researcher. The form was clear and well presented, and it incorporated some elements of the RTI framework. However, in speaking with the staff at JQA Middle School, it did not seem that implementation was happening with fidelity. Teachers reported that they are often not able to meet due to scheduling conflicts with parent conferences or special education meetings. Teachers also reported that when they do find time to meet, there is a lack of interventions available for them to recommend. In addition, teachers stated that there is rarely an administrator at CAP meetings, and they do not feel empowered to make certain decisions about students. This has left teachers feeling like there is no follow through to completion?

District PowerPoint. A presentation in the form of a PowerPoint was presented to the faculty at JQA in May of 2014 as a training document to begin the implementation process of RTI. The PowerPoint incorporated several components: the rationale behind RTI, the basic components of RTI, incorporation of teacher activities and classroom scenarios, and forms to use including checklists and referral documents. The most compelling piece of the PowerPoint from the perspective of the research was the final slide, entitled “Road Blocks.” Listed on this slide was the following: “Lack of Tier 2 interventions,” “no built in support for general education students,” “what is feasible for teachers,” “what is allowed,” and “time.” This slide is the most
compelling to the researcher because the “road blocks” that were identified in 2014 can been seen throughout the emergent themes in the current research.

The documents that were reviewed as part of the research methodology confirmed what had been said during interviews and focus groups. They confirmed that JQA struggled with the implementation of RTI when it was initially introduced four years ago, and continues to contend? with current implementation. In order for the implementation of any new initiative to be successful, there must be skill building for practitioners and other key members within the organization. Also, changes in organizational structures are needed to routinely bring about and support changes in adult behavior. Without changes to the existing organizational structure, the implementation of any new initiative will not be effective or sustainable long term(Fixsen et al., 2005).

Summary

This qualitative case study consisted of five individual interviews, a focus group, and a document review. Collectively, the interviews, focus group, and documents painted a thematic picture of the district, building, and teacher interpretations and perceptions of RTI at one middle school. An analysis of the data showed that there is a district expectation for RTI. However, building level administrators are left to their own interpretation of how it should be implemented. There was little evidence to suggest that there are clear expectations regarding what should be happening at the building level, and building level administrators feel that something should be happening but it is not clear what that is. In turn, teachers expressed frustration in the lack of direction, structure, and process.

Administrators and teachers at JQA Middle School all initially had positive feelings regarding the RTI framework and initiative, but they Each participant expressed frustration with
RTI implementation. The application of RTI cannot be left to individual interpretations of what is supposed to happen at the building level (Spillane, 2009). Given that each administrator and teacher comes to the process with a variety of experiences, knowledge, and beliefs, without a clear and consistent message and well-defined implementation steps, RTI will continue to flounder, making little impact on teaching and learning (Spillane, 2009). RTI requires a shift in teacher practice and strategies (Pyle et al, 2011). Without well defined implementation steps and consistency in current practices, the reform has led to teacher frustration and will continue to struggle, making little impact unless there are changes in the implementation process.

In general, the staff at JQA Middle School agreed that students’ needs are becoming more complex and that students are coming to the middle school lacking in some basic skills. Therefore, educators must look at things differently in order to improve outcomes for students. Participants felt that RTI could be an effective mechanism to do that if implemented with consistency and fidelity.

Throughout all of the interviews and in the focus group, it was evident that there is an excellent team of teachers and administrators who are extremely dedicated. Everyone expressed their willingness to make changes and to work on behalf of students. One of the teachers stated “everyone is really, truly willing to help in any way, shape, or form, and that’s a great thing.” Administrators acknowledged all of the work that teachers do in their classrooms every day. Having such willing and hardworking teachers and administrators is going to be an asset to JQA Middle School in order to get RTI on track.
Chapter V: Discussion of the Research Findings

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

JQA Middle School has been in the process of creating a climate and culture for RTI since spring of 2014. Given the results of interviews and the focus group, it appears that building administrators and teachers are continuing to struggle with making sense of the district’s expectations for the implementation of RTI and the implementation process at the building level. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative case study is to gain insight into how building administrators and teachers within JQA Middle School have interpreted the expectation for the implementation of RTI. What are their perceptions regarding the current state of RTI, and what do they believe could improve RTI at JQA Middle School? The research questions for the study are the following:

1. How have building administrators and educators at one middle school interpreted the district’s expectations for the implementation of RTI?
2. What are the perceptions of building administrators and educators at one middle school regarding the current state of RTI?
3. What do building administrators and educators at JQA Middle School believe could improve the current state of RTI?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its ability to examine the implementation of RTI in the context of one middle school with carryover into the field of RTI implementation in middle schools as a whole. This research examined how building administrators and teachers at JQA Middle School have interpreted the district’s expectation for the implementation of RTI, while
examining their perceptions of the current state of RTI and their beliefs as to what might improve RTI at JQA Middle School.

RTI research at the elementary level has been ongoing and robust. However, RTI research specific to implementation at the secondary level remains limited. This leaves middle schools who want to implement RTI to devise their own approaches (Brozo, 2010). Middle schools are distinctly different from elementary schools. Therefore, it is likely that RTI may need to be modified to fit into the culture, climate, and structures of middle schools. This research may begin to provide insight into the implementation of RTI at the middle school level by exploring the perceptions of staff at one middle school regarding the current state of RTI and their beliefs regarding what might need to be implemented in order to improve RTI (Fuchs et al., 2010). RTI research at the middle school level is important because middle school represents a critical point in a student’s academic career, laying the foundation for successful completion of high school (Morris, Ehren, & Lenz, 1991). Robert Balfanz (2009), states that middle school plays a pivotal role in student success during and after high school. Therefore, there is a sense of urgency among middle school educators to enhance resources, improve instruction, and provide intervention (Fuchs et al., 2010). RTI has the potential to transform middle schools and better prepare students for high school and beyond (Cooper, Slavin, & Madden, 1998). However, without clearly aligned expectations from the district level to the building level and into individual classrooms, RTI will struggle to meet the promise of improving student outcomes.

**Discussion of Major Findings**

The examination of the data collected in this study from the focus groups and several individual interviews revealed several emergent themes that were discussed in Chapter 4. Those themes provided the foundation for the following three major findings:
Without explicit implementation steps and directives from district and building level, administration teachers became frustrated and lack trust in the process.

Staff have strong opinions regarding the need for clear and unambiguous procedures and process for the routine implementation of RTI.

JQA Middle School has attempted to implement RTI within their current structure, and the staff believe that RTI could be implemented with some changes in current practices and structures.

**Without explicit implementation steps and directives from district and building level, administration teachers became frustrated and lack trust in the process.** While the district expected RTI to be implemented at the middle school. However, without explicit implementation guidelines and resources from the district and building level, administration teachers became frustrated and RTI has become a failed initiative. Top-down initiatives such as RTI require a high level of commitment and support. Emily, the school psychologist, stated that RTI cannot be a “grassroots movement.” In other words, RTI does not just happen. It needs to be cultivated and supported by administrators.

Currently, JQA Middle School is lacking in explicit steps for the implementation of RTI. Although teachers and building administrators explained that RTI has been discussed at faculty meetings and during professional development opportunities, there has been little discussion during interviews or the focus group that define actual steps taken toward implementation. Fixsen et al. (2005), describe implementation as “a specified set of activities designed to put into place an activity or program…where an independent observer can detect the specific activities related to the implementation, where the activity or program can be described in sufficient detail so that it can be independently observed.” There was little evidence of consistent observable
activities that would constitute implementation. In order for any new top-down initiatives to reach sustainability, an organization must define specific tasks and activities to be assigned and carried out by members of the organization. This may require a change in existing roles and responsibilities, or may require the addition of staff hired specifically for implementing the activities and maintaining fidelity of the project.

Staff have strong opinions regarding the need for clear and unambiguous procedures and process for the day-to-day implementation of RTI. The district expects RTI to be implemented, however, building leadership needs to provide teachers and other building personnel with a process and procedure for the implementation of RTI, including prescribed interventions for students when they are experiencing difficulty in school. Currently, teachers and building administrators have explained that there is no process for RTI, and when PCT time is scheduled, there is seldom an administrator there to help make decisions about interventions for students. Teachers stated that they do not know who has the authority to make decisions about student interventions.

Participants reported that RTI at JQA Middle School needs direction and clarity from administration. The teacher focus group was vocal regarding the need for direction and clarity from administration. Leeann stated “it’s very disjointed, and if you have a child that you have concerns about, the child study team model is falling apart… do your case study, your referral system, and then it just disappears. I don’t know whether that’s a problem of people not being sure whose job it is, but there’s no good system for tracking students.” Suzanne, a general education science teacher, stated, “who do I hand it into? We don’t know. What happens after this? We don’t know.” Teachers are unclear about what the process is and who is responsible for making decisions regarding students. Without clarity and consistency at the building level
regarding the structure and process of RTI, it will struggle to meet the promise of impacting student growth. Without a structure and process in place that is clear to everyone, RTI will continue to be just another educational acronym that is doing little to impact teaching and learning. RTI requires implementation with fidelity. In other words, it must be a system that everyone agrees with and adheres to, where child study teams meet regularly to analyze data and make educational decisions for students.

Teachers currently do not feel empowered to make decisions regarding student learning. In order for students to get what they need, teachers need to know who is responsible for making and implementing decisions of behalf of students, and they need to feel empowered to make educational decisions in their own classrooms. Leeann feels as though the lack of direction is a result of teachers not feeling empowered to implement interventions or strategies that are discussed. “We can come up with great ideas, and we’re compassionate and passionate about intervening so they can better learn, but who do you go to? Where is the next stop? Where do we get the help? Who do we get the help from?” Without clarity regarding the process and responsibility for decision-making and follow-through, teachers will continue to feel frustrated.

**JQA Middle School has attempted to implement RTI within their current structure, but the staff believe that RTI could be implemented with some changes in current practices and structures.** In order for JQA Middle School to begin to see the benefits of RTI, they will require whole school reform. Throughout the study, participants consistently discussed the need to reexamine some of the schools’ current practices and structures if RTI is going to be successful. Emily, the school psychologist, thought that JQA Middle School could “restructure personnel and use people in a different capacity…RTI would require restructuring and looking at the problem differently.”
Two items were discussed among the participants that are reflective of whole school change: the need to reexamine the current schedule and the need to redesign and reexamine the current roles and responsibilities of strategic staff members. Participants consistently discussed the need to develop a new school schedule that supports staff and students. Brendan, the building principal, stated that “teachers have a hard time balancing the needs of the students and the demands of the curriculum.” He continued to say that when he worked in another district, the schedule included a floating block “where kids can go to get services or get support from a specific teacher. I think that is what we are missing.” Brendan also commented that the length of the blocks is short.

Our class time is forty-nine minutes, but by the time kids get to the next class and get settled it is more like forty-five. It’s like a racetrack. Teachers feel rushed and they don’t have the time they need during class. I would love to extend the blocks 10-15 minutes.

Amelia, the assistant principal, stated that the schedule is very demanding and that there is no time during the day for general education students to receive support. Amelia stated, “we don’t have any place for them to go. If you have a student who is struggling that would benefit from some sort of support, we have no place to put them.”

Teachers felt that JQA Middle School should examine current roles and responsibilities so that teachers had clarity regarding the process and who is responsible. Teachers reported, there’s things that are complete ambiguity; who is doing what? There is a lack of direction, we can discuss it, we can come up with great ideas, and we’re compassionate and passionate about intervening so students can learn, but who do you go to? Where is the next stop? Where do we get the help? Who do we get the help from? It’s very unfair. Not that you need to have an administrator sitting in your seat, but shouldn’t they
be kind of visiting once in a while? Shouldn’t they stop by? I don’t know. It should be collaborative. I’ve been to schools where that’s part of the administrative schedule it’s part of their day, to visit all the teams and to see what’s going on and to make the bridge.

Looking at these two areas might be a starting point for whole school reform at JQA Middle School. Although the RTI framework has specific components such as: universal screening, regular progress monitoring and a tiered intervention system, RTI also allows schools to individualize how they are implemented (Johnson & Smith, 2011). For example, they can design a schedule that would meet the needs of students and teachers while satisfying contract requirements. This could include developing a clear protocol for referring students and assigning assistant principals to sit in and be available during meetings so that decisions can be made regarding what should happen for students.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

This research is reviewed in relationship to Spillane’s (2009) cognitive framework theory. Spillane’s theory takes into consideration the multiple complexities and influences that become involved when individuals are making sense of new concepts. Spillane’s cognitive framework theory is centered upon how individuals interpret information differently, given that each person has differences in their prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. These differences influence how they understand new constructs. Spillane’s theory also considers the context and the situation in which change is occurring. Spillane suggests that the context is not simply a backdrop, but rather has a significant impact on the implementation of new constructs, and therefore cannot be dismissed when examining school change.

Context is a multifaceted construct that includes personal identities, organizational structures, traditions, culture, and climate. Implementation research suggests that the context in
which implementation is occurring influences a person’s sensemaking. People’s immediate environments greatly contribute to the ways in which they make sense of a new experience. Social norms and current organizational structures are also important variables for those charged with implementation to consider when trying to make sense of a new initiative. Therefore, when individuals are experiencing change, they draw not only upon their existing reservoir of knowledge to make sense of what is being asked of them, they also draw on the situation, and context, of their environment and the signals from district and building leadership (Spillane et al, 2002).

Spillane’s (2009?) cognitive framework theory has informed the study by providing a theoretical lens for the researcher to analyze the data collected during the study. Cognitive framework theory assumes that each individual has defined? the expectations differently, allowing for multiple interpretations of the same message. Multiple interpretations influence the ability of the reform effort to succeed. Even subtle differences in each person’s interpretation affect the reform because each individual envisions the change differently, which hinders the development of logical steps to implement the new construct.

Spillane’s (2009) cognitive framework theory helped to provide the researcher with a framework to make sense of the findings. Major findings from the study included the need for explicit implementation steps, clear and unambiguous procedures for the day-to-day implementation of RTI, and the need for whole school reform. This study demonstrates that when teachers and building administrators do not have clarity and explicit steps, they may interpret it differently and ultimately have difficulty with implementation. Teachers and administrators have different ideas about how RTI is to be implemented, and when expectations are not clear across stakeholders, the implementation process is hindered.
The implementation of a new idea requires changing a person’s belief system, practice, and attitudes toward teaching and learning, and requires a cognitive shift. This shift is a key dimension of the implementation process. Some explanations for implementation failure focus on the inability of building principals to formulate clear outcomes or adequately supervise the implementation process, and without clear directions, it is unlikely that teachers will be able to change their belief systems and practices on their own (Spillane at al, 2002).

Spillane’s (2009?) cognitive framework theory also states that successful, sustainable change requires that everyone involved in the change effort interpret the information in the same way, in order to move the framework from theory to implementation. Without consistent interpretation from all stakeholders, any reform will fall short of meeting the expectation. In the context of this study, RTI as currently implemented has not met the expectation of implementation. Although there is a general expectation for the implementation of RTI between the district and the building, implementation details and logistics at the building level have been left to multiple interpretations, ultimately ending in confusion. In this context, it is unlikely that teachers will be able to transition from current practices to new practices.

**Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature Review**

Chapter 2 of this thesis reviews the pertinent literature related to RTI and the implementation of RTI specific to middle schools. This section shares the findings of this study related to the research questions and the topics discussed in Chapter 2.

**Successful implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI).** Response to Intervention (RTI) is an educational framework that provides a tiered system of implementing evidence-based instructional strategies in the general education setting; it includes frequent measuring of student progress to determine whether given strategies are effective (Canter, Klotz,
RTI has been promoted by several professional organizations such as The National Association of Special Education Directors, the National Association of School Psychologists, the International Reading Association, and educational experts such as Douglas and Lynn Fuchs from Vanderbilt University, as a way of closing the achievement gap and improving student outcomes without the need for special education (Sansosti et al., 2010). RTI provides systematic, research-based interventions to meet the challenges of struggling learners, and it promotes shared responsibility and collaboration among general and special educators.

Successful implementation of RTI is an on-going process, and student outcomes are positively affected when traditional notions of teaching and learning are reconceptualized (Cooper, Slavin, & Madden, 1998). Although much of the research regarding RTI focuses on the implementation and successes found at the elementary level there is consensus that regardless of what level RTI is being implemented at, it will require whole school reform (Dulaney, 2012) which will require restructuring of schedules as well as redesigning teaching and learning. JQA Middle School had noble ideas in attempting to implement RTI. However, RTI requires that current structures be dismantled so that new practices can be put into place. JQA Middle School tried to implement RTI within their current school structure and schedule. In trying to implement RTI within the current structure, JQA Middle School was never able to move past the initial phases of development. Teachers never saw RTI as different from what they were currently doing. This ultimately ended in teacher frustration and limited progress in implementation.

RTI also requires changes in the roles and responsibilities of teachers and other specialists. Classroom teachers, school psychologists, and other related service providers must begin to see themselves as “interventionists” who are responsible for remediating skills rather
than strictly delivering content. This is a change in how middle school teachers and other staff typically think about their current roles and responsibilities (Johnson & Smith, 2011). In relation to the research conducted during this case study, JQA has attempted to implement RTI without considering the need to restructure the current schedule or current staffing patterns. Whole school reform requires that teachers and administrators think and do their jobs differently than before. When reform efforts are forced into existing infrastructures, less than desirable outcomes occur (Berends et al., 2002).

The literature also suggests that any whole school reform requires support and cooperation from staff. It requires that administrators build capacity among their staff to support the initiative. This can be done through professional development or regular implementation team meetings. The Pine Hills School district and JQA Middle School have done little regarding continued professional development in the area of RTI. Teachers reported that there was some professional development initially offered by the district. However, it did not continue. The need for continued assessment of the initiative has also been overlooked. Implementation of a new initiative requires that administrators meet with teachers regularly in order to provide continued support, while also eliciting feedback and reviewing data in order to make programmatic adjustments if needed. Regular meetings ensure that staff receive support, administrators gather feedback, and the initiative meets its promise of effectiveness and sustainability.

**Implementing top-down initiatives such as RTI at the local level can be challenging work.** One of the biggest challenges in implementing top-down school change is ensuring that each person involved has the same interpretation of the expectation. In other words, district
leaders are charged with the task of ensuring that all stakeholders understand not only the broad view of the initiative but also each small logistic step at the building level.

The research at JQA Middle School shows that although there is consensus at the district and building level regarding the expectation for RTI, there are many differences in the perceptions of district and building staff regarding the current state of RTI, and what next steps may be in order to improve RTI. Participants throughout the study, even the assistant superintendent, acknowledged that RTI was not meeting the current expectation and that more needed to be done to improve the current state of RTI. Administrators had a more positive picture of RTI in its current state, while teachers expressed utter frustration regarding the initiative. In addition, while most participants pointed to challenges with the current schedule and the need to examine a new structure for students and teachers, there was a difference in perception regarding the need for additional staffing. The teachers primarily felt the need for more staffing. It is the belief of the researcher that the teachers feel this way because they feel overwhelmed and that if the structure and process were different and things felt more manageable due to a change in structure, they might feel differently about staffing needs. Administrators, however, felt that with some training and restructuring, RTI could be realized with current staffing levels. Training would have to include professional development specific to middle school interventions available at different tiers and training relative to the implementation of interventions prior to referral to an RTI team. The current role and responsibility of the math and literacy coaches will need to be redesigned so that they can meet the expectation for RTI and feel empowered to make decisions for students as well as provide Tier 3 interventions in literacy and math. Currently, there is no consistency in how these positions function, and there is no data to support that the positions as structured are making a positive impact on student outcomes.
The implementation of RTI specific to middle schools is complicated by the absence of research and the lack of documented success. The lack of research of RTI at the middle school level leaves school leaders to develop their own interpretation and devise their own approaches on how to implement RTI in their buildings (Shanklin, 2008). Therefore, the success of the initiative will be impacted by how teachers and administrators work together to ensure that everyone involved experiences and understands exactly what the expectation is from state, district, and local perspectives. It appears that the idea of RTI was well intended; however there are several missing pieces that if not implemented will continue to hinder RTI at JQA Middle School. The implementation of RTI will undoubtedly require whole school reform and a restructuring of their current system as well as a shift in their thinking regarding the delivery of instruction.

Although there is no agreement among researchers regarding the “right way” to implement RTI in middle schools, they do agree that RTI reflects a substantive systems change that is not possible without totally reforming the way in which middle schools deliver instruction (Wiener, 2008). Substantive systematic change in education commonly encounters challenges in moving from possibility to implementation, and often the pragmatic logistics are critically important to a successful change initiative. Teachers continually reported that they were unclear regarding the process and logistics of RTI within their building. They reported feeling frustrated that the paperwork and process were outdated, and they never felt as though anyone was “in charge” of RTI. Teachers found it difficult to make decisions regarding student programming, and they didn’t know who to go to when they had questions about students.

Small logistics such as paperwork and process seem to have a large impact on teacher efficacy when it comes to the implementation of new initiatives, and yet most of implementation
literature seems to focus on implementing big picture ideas and not the smaller logistics that need to be implemented at the building level in order for RTI to be successful. Yet this research illustrates the importance of clearly communicating with teachers not only the big picture ideas but also the daily logistics. As a result, teachers expressed frustration due to the lack of clear and explicit directives regarding the day-to-day execution of RTI. Teacher frustration will affect their ability to implement the initiative due to confusion and uncertainty over what is expected.

Conclusions

The intention of this qualitative study was to investigate the interpretations and perceptions of middle school educators regarding the implementation of RTI at one middle school. The data collected were analyzed through a qualitative design, using a general inductive approach, which sought to answer three research questions:

1. How have building administrators and educators at JQA Middle School interpreted the district’s expectations for the implementation of RTI?
2. What are the perceptions of building administrators and educators regarding the current state of RTI at JQA Middle School?
3. What do building administrators and educators at JQA Middle School believe could improve the current state of RTI?

Individual interviews and a focus group were used to collect data about the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding the current state of RTI at JQA Middle School and potential considerations that might improve the current state of RTI. All data was coded and themes were examined and analyzed.

The results of this study show that there is a district expectation to implement RTI at the middle school level, however, the interpretation of the districts expectation is inconsistent and
more work needs to be done in order to ensure that the district expectation is more clearly defined at the building level regarding the development of a clear process for RTI and clarifying roles and responsibilities for the various associated tasks, so that the school (its administrators and staff) can indeed respond accordingly. Implications for the district are that, although there seems to be a clear global expectation of RTI, the logistics of the RTI process at the building level aren’t as clear. There is also confusion regarding who is in charge of RTI and who will ensure that RTI is implemented with fidelity.

**Limitations**

The study offers opportunities for more discussion and investigation in the area of RTI in middle school. However, there several limitations. The study only included staff from one middle school and was limited to the number of participants who volunteered to participate. Future research may include additional middle schools across multiple school districts, while increasing the number of focus groups and interviews. Despite the limited scope of the study, it does provide insight into the perceptions of middle school staff regarding the current state of RTI at JQA Middle School and potential conversation starters for the improvement of RTI. These insights have the potential to provide information to the great body of research related to the implementation of RTI in middle schools.

**Validity**

Validity threats were discussed in Chapter 3. They included controlling for researcher bias and response bias. Potential for bias is possible, due to the researcher being employed as an administrator in the district. This could have influenced how participants responded to questioning. However, the researcher is not an evaluator for any participants and the researcher
ensured participants that their participation would be kept confidential and that in no way would their participation impact their employment.

**Future Research**

Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) state that implementation of RTI for early grades is possible; however, there is significant lack of research and evidence regarding the feasibility of RTI in middle schools. The findings of this study offer future researchers a body of knowledge specific to the implementation of RTI in middle schools. There is potential to expand this study, increasing the number of participating middle schools by including the other middle school within the district or including middle schools from other school districts and by increasing the number of teachers and administrators.

Consistently, participants felt that RTI was not improving student outcomes as currently implemented. Therefore, future research should consider revisiting the RTI initiative to reexamine the current schedule and RTI process. Once JQA Middle School has reexamined and redesigned RTI, future studies should seek to determine if RTI has moved past the initial stages of implementation to actually having a positive impact on student’s outcomes by decreasing referral rates to special education. Future research may also include parent data to determine if parents see positive outcomes from RTI.

**Recommendations**

The staff at JQA Middle School believe that RTI has merit. However, the lack of direction at the building level has hindered the RTI process. Therefore, JQA Middle School should revisit the initiative and consider the following recommendations:

- Assemble a committee to design a new schedule that supports RTI.
- Create a professional development plan that supports teachers, administrators and coaches.

- Clearly delineate and define roles and responsibilities.

- Develop an RTI task force or implementation team in order to keep the RTI initiative on track and moving forward.

JQA Middle School should consider assembling a committee comprising district and building staff to design a new schedule that supports RTI. The committee should specifically look at designing a schedule that supports the key components of RTI. These components include decreasing the number of academic classes in order to provide intervention blocks during the school day, extending the blocks, discussing the need for teacher duties, ensuring that professional collaboration time or team time is kept sacred so that teachers are not pulled to other meetings, and ensure that PCT is expected of administrators as well so that decisions that require administrative authority can be made.

JQA Middle School should consider a long-term professional development plan that supports teachers, administrators, and coaches in RTI. Administrators, coaches, school psychologist, guidance counselors, school adjustment counselor and the special education department head should receive professional development regarding the facilitation of the RTI process as well as training in how to recommend and deliver Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions for middle school students. JQA Middle School may wish to consider an RTI consultant to assist with the administrative team to create an RTI framework that is specific to the needs and context of their building.

Teachers will also require professional development. Teacher professional development should focus on creating a shared vision for RTI and establishing teacher buy-in. Once a shared
vision and buy-in is established, teachers should receive general RTI training in addition to training that specifies the RTI process developed by the administrative team. The implementation of a professional development plan should be an ongoing process in which RTI is continually revisited and staff are continually supported. JQA Middle School should also address the issue of new staff being hired along the way and how they will receive the training.

JQA needs to clearly delineate and define roles and responsibilities as they relate to RTI. Role clarity will need to be addressed in order to provide teachers with a clear understanding of who is charged with the initiative. Questions that continually came up during the study were: Who is in charge of RTI? Who makes decisions for students? Who decides what interventions should be happening? In addition, JQA Middle School should consider an RTI handbook. The handbook could be incorporated into an already existing document. This could include schedules, meeting times, and a list of who is responsible for what action item. This would bring clarity to the process and give teachers something to refer to if questions arise regarding students or the process.

JQA Middle School should consider developing an RTI task force or implementation team in order to keep the RTI initiative on track and moving forward. Higgins, Weiner, and Young (2012) introduce a team called “implementation team” in order to assist organizations with large-scale reform such as RTI. RTI requires change at all organizational levels, and an implementation team would be responsible to ensure that individuals across the organization implement the team’s plan by certifying buy-in throughout and at all levels of the organization while increasing the chance for fidelity. Implementation teams differ from existing task forces or teams because they move past discussion or decision making and focus on implementation. JQA Middle School may wish to consider an implementation team to enable the initiative to
move forward. Implementation teams also allow members to bring concerns or issues to the table to be discussed so that they can be addressed immediately.

**Personal Commentary**

This study was very much tied to my work as the district’s director of special education. When I was hired three year ago, the district stated that RTI was being implemented. When I arrived, however, it appeared that RTI was unsystematic and almost absent at the middle school. In collecting data via the district’s student information system there were a lot of special education referrals at the middle school level, and while some disability types can certainly become more obvious as students enter middle school, there were many students who seemed to be struggling with things like organization and homework that were not necessarily disability related.

As I continued my work within the district, I felt that special education was really the foundation of intervention for students. The process of special education is labor intensive in terms of compliance, and a “wait to fail” model. Special education, is not the most efficient or effective way of providing supports and interventions to students. In an effective RTI model general education teachers differentiate their instruction and students receive support, remediation or intervention immediately. In other words, students receive help when and where they need it and do not require testing, meetings or long documents to get the help they need in the moment.

I knew from the beginning of my doctoral work that I wanted to investigate RTI to help students and teachers in some way. My hope is that the results of this study will be shared with the district and the building to provide a catalyst to improve RTI, especially at the middle school level. The findings of this study show that currently RTI requires some attention from the
district and building administrators in order to improve teaching and learning. The information from this research and its findings have real implications for the implementation of RTI, district wide and possibly beyond.

Hargreaves (2004) states that teachers can be profoundly resistant to change. Even those who are motivated by change can become demoralized and mistrustful of administrators when they are not empowered during the implementation of a new program such as RTI and when a new initiative lacks leadership and direction. Teachers at JQA Middle School are excited about change and prepared to implement new practices and processes to improve teaching and learning. The Pine Hills School District and JQA Middle School should find a way to capitalize on the good energy and attitudes of the teachers and staff in order to improve the current state of RTI in hopes of improving not only teaching and learning for students but also the culture and climate of the school.

This study has had a great impact on my perspective as a school leader and will continue to inform my thinking throughout my career. Although the context of this study was the implementation of an RTI initiative at one middle school, the study also gave me perspective on a more global level regarding systems changes relative to schools and educational organizations. This study has inspired me to thinking differently in terms of my ability to change systems and move organizations forward toward new innovations.

Educational systems cannot be static entities. They must be in constant flux in order to keep up with our fast changing 21st century world and keep our student current with the demands they will encounter. Therefore, as an educational leader I must be thoughtful in my approach regarding school change. This study has shown me that my approach to school change must be different if the changes I am proposing are to have an impact on teaching and learning.
Changing organizational structures is difficult and demanding, however if as school leaders we
take the time to listen to our staff, students, parents and other stakeholders, often the answers
regarding school change become apparent. As educational leaders we have to do our due
diligence and listen to those who will be impacted by change the most.
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Appendix A: Permission Letter to Superintendent of Schools

Dr. Gary Maestas, Superintendent
{DISTRICT} Public Schools Central Office
253 South Meadow Rd.
Plymouth, MA  02360

November 16, 2015

Dear Dr. Maestas,

As you know I am in the final phase of writing my doctoral thesis proposal at Northeastern University. The purpose of this letter is to request consent to conduct a case study of teacher and administrator interpretations and experiences of the implementation process of Response to Intervention at Plymouth Community Intermediate School.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to better understand how teachers and administrators have perceived and experienced the district’s Response to Intervention implementation process.

I am proposing to use the following data sets: document analysis, individual interviews of school administrators and teacher focus groups. Interviews and focus groups will be selected from willing participants. Prior to the review of any documents, interviews, or focus groups, I will have obtained approval from Northeastern University IRB approving all protocols, letters, consent forms, and data collection instruments.

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me directly at (508) 224-5050 or via e-mail at rogers.sta@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Christopher Unger at cunger@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Stacey A. Rogers
Director of Special Education
Appendix B: Permission Letter to Principal

Mr. Brian Palladino  
{SCHOOL} Plymouth Community Intermediate School  
118 Long Pond Road  
Plymouth, MA 02360  

November 16, 2015  

Dear Mr. Palladino,  

As you know I am in the final phase of writing my doctoral thesis proposal at Northeastern University. The purpose of this letter is to request consent to conduct a case study of teacher and administrator interpretations and experiences of the implementation process of Response to Intervention at Plymouth Community Intermediate School.  

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to better understand how teachers and administrators have perceived and experienced the districts Response to Intervention implementation process.  

I am proposing to use the following data sets: document analysis, individual interviews of school administrators, and teacher focus groups. Interviews and focus groups will be selected from willing participants. Prior to the review of any documents, interviews, or focus groups, I will have obtained approval from Northeastern University IRB approving all protocols, letters, consent forms, and data collection instruments.  

If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me directly at (508) 224-5050 or via e-mail at rogers.sta@husky.neu.edu. You may also contact my advisor, Dr. Christopher Unger at cunger@husky.neu.edu.  

Thank you for your consideration.  

Sincerely,  

Stacey A. Rogers  
Director of Special Education
Appendix C: Initial Teacher Participant Recruitment Letter

November 16, 2015

Dear Teachers,

As some of you know, I am currently pursuing my doctorate in education from Northeastern University. As part of this pursuit, will be conducting a research study on how middle school teachers at PCIS have interpreted and experienced the district’s expectations for the implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI).

I am currently looking for teachers who would be interested in participating in this study. The study will consist of teacher focus groups where you will engage in dialogue with other teachers while being audiotaped. The audiotapes from our discussions will be transcribed and later analyzed. At this time, I am looking for teachers who may be interested in participating in this study.

Your participation in this study will in no way impact your work here in the school or our relationship as colleagues. In addition, any personal information will be kept confidential. If you are interested in participating or learning more, please respond via e-mail to rogers.sta@husky.neu.edu. Thank you in advance for your time.

Stacey A. Rogers
Northeastern University Doctoral Student
Appendix D: Initial Administrator Participant Recruitment Letter

November 16, 2015

Dear Administrators,

As some of you know, I am currently pursuing my doctorate in education from Northeastern University. As part of this pursuit, I will be conducting a research study on how middle school administrators at PCIS have interpreted and experienced the district’s expectations for the implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI).

I am currently looking for building administrators who would be interested in participating in this study. The study will consist of a 1:1 interview with me while being audiotaped. The audiotapes from our discussion will be transcribed and later analyzed. At this time, I am looking for administrators who may be interested in participating in this study.

Your participation in this study will in no way impact your work here in the school or our relationship as colleagues. In addition, all personal information will be kept confidential. If you are interested in participating or learning more please respond via e-mail to rogers.sta@husky.neu.edu. Thank you in advance for your time.

Stacey A. Rogers
Northeastern University Doctoral Student
Appendix E: Teacher Study Application

Dear [Name],

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study. If you are still interested in participating, please read the following application, complete the consent, and return it to rogers.sta@husky.neu.edu.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research study is to examine how teachers and administrators have interpreted and experienced the implementation of RTI at PCIS.

**What will I be asked to do?** The researcher will be facilitating a focus group consisting of 6-8 teachers. The focus group will be audiotaped and transcribed in order to be analyzed.

**Where will this take place and how long will it take?** The focus group will take place after school hours in a conference room located at PCIS and will take no longer than one hour.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort?** There is no significant risk involved.

**Will I benefit from participating in this study?** There are no direct benefits for participating in this study. It is hoped that the results of this study will improve RTI implementation practices within the district.

**Will my answers and information be confidential?** Pseudonyms will be used for all participants, and only the researcher will be aware of participant identities. No report or publication will use information that can identify you, the school, or the district.

**What if I do not want to participate in this study?** You are in no way required to participate in this study. If you do not want to participate, do not sign or return this form.

**What if I want to stop my participation in this study?** Participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you may stop at any time. You can refuse to answer questions and may discontinue your participation without any cost or penalty.

**Will I be paid for my participation for this study?** You will not be paid or receive any compensation for your participation in this study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate in this study?** There is no cost to participate in this study.
Who can I contact if I have any questions about this study?
Stacey A. Rogers
Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies
Cell#: 617-968-0497
Email: rogers.sta@husky.neu.edu

I have read and understood the participation consent form. I had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form and I have agreed to voluntarily participate in this study. You will be contacted via email with specific dates and times of your focus group.

Name:

Email:

Grade taught:

Content area taught:

How involved are/were you in any initial RTI work at PCIS or another school district?

Participant Signature          Date

Participant Name Printed

Researcher Signature          Date
Stacey A. Rogers
Appendix F: Administrator Study Application

Dear ,

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study. If you are still interested in participating, please read the following application, complete the consent, and return it to rogers.sta@husky.neu.edu.

**Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research study is to examine how teachers and administrators have interpreted and experienced the implementation of RTI at PCIS.

**What will I be asked to do?** The researcher will be facilitating a 1:1 interview, which will be audiotaped and transcribed in order to be analyzed.

**Where will this take place and how long will it take?** The focus group will take place after school hours in a conference room located at PCIS and will take no longer than one hour.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort?** There is no significant risk involved.

**Will I benefit from participating in this study?** There are no direct benefits for participating in this study. It is hoped that the results of this study will improve RTI implementation practices within the district.

**Will my answers and information be confidential?** Pseudonyms will be used for all participants, and only the researcher will be aware of participant identities. No report or publication will use information that can identify you, the school, or the district.

**What if I do not want to participate in this study?** You are in no way required to participate in this study. If you do not want to participate, do not sign or return this form.

**What if I want to stop my participation in this study?** Participation in this study is strictly voluntary and you may stop at any time. You can refuse to answer questions and may discontinue your participation without any cost or penalty.

**Will I be paid for my participation for this study?** You will not be paid or receive any compensation for your participation in this study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate in this study?** There is no cost to participate in this study.
Who can I contact if I have any questions about this study?
Stacey A. Rogers
Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies
Cell#: 617-968-0497
Email: rogers.sta@husky.neu.edu

I have read and understood the participation consent form. I had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form and I have agreed to voluntarily participate in this study.

Name:

Email:

Grade taught:

Content area taught:

Participant Signature Date

Participant Name Printed

Researcher Signature Date
Stacey A. Rogers
Appendix G-Teacher Focus Group Questions

1. What has the implementation of RTI looked like at XYZ Middle School?

2. What is the district’s expectation for the implementation of RTI at XYZ Middle School?

3. What is the buildings expectation for the implementation of RTI at XYZ Middle School?

4. What has your experience been regarding the implementation of RTI at XYZ Middle School?

5. How might the implementation process be improved?

6. What information/training/materials do teachers need to move RTI forward in XYZ Middle School?

7. How is this different from what is currently happening at XYZ Middle School regarding the implementation of RTI?

8. Do you think RTI can make a difference in student outcomes if implemented well?
Appendix H-Administrator Interview Questions

1. What has the implementation of RTI looked like at XYZ Middle School?

2. What is the district’s expectation for the implementation of RTI at XYZ Middle School?

3. What is the building’s expectation for the implementation of RTI at JQA Middle School?

4. What has your experience been regarding the implementation of RTI at JQA Middle School?

5. How might the implementation process be improved?

6. What information/training/materials do the school and teachers need to move RTI forward in XYZ Middle School?

7. How is this different from what is currently happening at XYZ Middle School regarding the implementation of RTI?

8. Do you think RTI can make a difference in student outcomes if implemented well?
Appendix I: Document Review Summary Form

1. Name of document

2. Significance of document

3. How does the document relate to each research question?

4. Other pertinent information: