RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY AT AN URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN NEW MEXICO

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand how participants in an urban elementary school in New Mexico experienced the implementation of a multi-tiered Response to Intervention (RTI) system. More specifically, this research provided an opportunity to examine the latter stages of a long-term RTI implementation effort. The following three research questions guided this study: 1) How did an urban elementary school in New Mexico implement an integrated RTI model? 2) How did implementation of an integrated RTI framework change teaching practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico? 3) How did implementation of an integrated RTI framework change leadership practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico? Data were collected from fourteen individual interviews, one focus group, documents from the case site, and observations of school based teams, like grade level, SAT and CTTs, and professional development meetings. Participants selected for the study represented members from across the elementary school organization, including those who held leadership roles relating to the RTI implementation. Data were analyzed through a general inductive approach and a constant comparison process that further facilitated the emergence of meaningful study findings.

In answering the first research question, a case narrative described the phases of the integrated RTI implementation that were chronicled by the teachers and administrators responsible for carrying out this initiative. The findings, from the second and third research questions, revealed that teaching and leadership practices were both impacted over the course of RTI implementation at the case site. As a result, teaching practices shifted to incorporate more individualized instruction, improved cooperation among stakeholders, and greater reliance on data for progress monitoring and refining of instructional practices. Changes in leadership
practices yielded a unified vision for school improvement: a culture of increased support and a restructuring of personnel to better serve students’ needs. From the findings, the following four conclusions were developed: 1) RTI prompted an increase in individualized instruction, which required a change in teaching mindset; 2) fundamental communication pathways and team structures were altered, resulting in greater collaboration across stakeholders; 3) teachers became more evidence-based and data-driven in their thinking and practice; and 4) the school community developed a heightened sense of internal accountability.

keywords: response to intervention, RTI, integrated, framework, tiered instruction, multi-tiered system of supports, teaching, leadership, practices, collaboration, cooperation, data-based, decision making, instructional changes, restructuring of roles, responsibilities, culture, support, vision, accountability
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CHAPTER ONE: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

“The longer a student goes without the necessary interventions, the more compounded his or her learning gaps and subsequent behavioral defenses become” (Cohn, 2009, p. 3).

Introduction

Due to its complexity, Response to Intervention (RTI) implementation presently confounds and even frustrates many teachers and administrators (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). As a reform effort, RTI challenges school practitioners to the point where consistent implementation is elusive. Research lacks understanding from point of view of teachers and administrators on the long-term implications of RTI implementation. Researchers and RTI implementation experts (Arden, Gandhi, Edmonds, & Danielson, 2017) stated the need for new research on the conditions that support the successful implementation of a fully integrated RTI framework.

Response To Intervention is viewed as a multi-tiered organizational framework that utilizes a continuum of both academic and behavioral supports for educational programming and eligibility decisions that contributes to the overall comprehensive school improvement efforts (NM PED, 2009). It is important for studies like this one to view reforms like RTI in their natural setting to better understand its impact on teachers and administrators. This qualitative case study examines the gaps in the literature on the implications of long-term RTI implementation in the natural setting of an elementary school.

Lawmakers, practitioners, and communities across the United States continue to strive for improved student performance and better graduation rates (Denton, 2012). Major federal laws, such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) of 2001, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act
IDEA) of 2004, and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 target public schools to improve student performance and close achievement gaps for all students, but especially for those students who have historically underperformed, like those in poverty or in special education (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). These laws require actors at the federal, state, and local levels to enact instructional experiences for all students that are rooted in evidence-based practices while assessing students through mandatory high-stakes testing (Hoover & Patton, 2008).

**RTI as Educational Reform**

As a framework, RTI is consistent with both state and federal policies that require schools to enact improved outcomes for all students and enable students to access a rigorous curriculum (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). With RTI’s emphasis on progress monitoring, evidence-based interventions, and early interventions, the framework practices meet many federal requirements. Additionally, RTI is a statute within the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). When legislators reauthorized NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004), they intended the two pieces of legislation to complement each other so that efforts by schools would effectively address the needs of the entire school’s population (Rinaldi, Averill, & Stuart, 2011). The two laws have "far-reaching implications for policies and practices of schools in the U.S." (Reeves, Bishop, & Filce, 2010, p. 31). Due to the accountability landscape in education, schools needed to systematically and consistently demonstrate evidence-based practices that were more comprehensive and quantifiable, particularly around the notion of student progress and performance (Reeves et al., 2010).

These federal laws created significant changes for schools. The laws require K – 12 public schools to be more attuned to student learning and accountable for it, as well. Under
NCLB (2001) and ESSA (2015), students from third grade to high school need to meet accountability standards in mathematics and reading set by the state for the school to be in compliance with the federal law. The laws’ requirements also included students in special education and classified as English Language Learners. Through the enforcement of the law, the publication of a school’s accountability report card shifted public conversations toward student learning and outcomes for all students, but for student subgroups, especially special education, that usually were omitted in state reports (Hehir, 2002).

The reauthorization of IDEA (2004) also provided changes for schools to address. In the law, it utilized the same phrase “scientifically-based” from NCLB (2001) to ensure that instruction for special education students is connected to state standards and best practices (Swanson, Solis, Ciullo, & McKenna, 2012). Scientifically based, researched-based, and evidence-based practices are used synonymously in the literature and in the education field (Hidden Curriculum, 2014). When making decisions around student needs, instruction, and interventions, the laws set the expectation of utilizing scientifically-based instructional practices that are supported by both qualitative and quantitative research studies that positively link student achievement and the instruction practice (Bouch, 2009). Types of studies included in scientifically-based research may be experimental, single case studies, other qualitative studies, and quantitative research (NCRT, 2010). This scientifically-based alignment between NCLB and IDEA moved educators away from anecdotal evidence to a more rigorous approach to decision making (Bouch, 2009). The use of scientifically-based practices placed educators in the position to ensure that an at-risk student is provided with appropriate instruction and interventions. Under the law, a student may not be eligible for special education services and specially designed instruction due to a lack of instruction and interventions in regular education. For example, a
student with a reading gap in comprehension would not be eligible for special education if he or she did not receive instruction and interventions to address this area. The evaluator doing the testing could not determine if the reading deficit was due to the student having a reading disability or whether the lack of instruction and educational opportunities created the learning gap.

Another change due to the reauthorization of IDEA (2004) concerned the use of special education budgets in public schools to address regular education needs. The allocation of up to 15% of special education budgets could be used to fund regular education supports and professional development that trained teachers on how to best instruct and identify at-risk students for early intervention (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). The use of special education funds for regular education purposes under previous law authorizations was not allowed. This allocation of funds from special education to regular education is significant because it allows schools to utilize funds for training and staffing to better support struggling learners. This allowance placed schools in a position to utilize the funds for preventative measures, such as providing staff training on reading or hiring additional staff to instruct at-risk students.

Lastly, IDEA (2004) attempts to reduce the disproportionate representation of students who are over-identified into special education by encouraging the state to use a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework rather than the previous discrepancy model that utilizes intelligence quotient (IQ) testing. States are no longer obligated to base special education decisions solely on this type of testing. The law allows states to adopt a wider range of test measures and practices to make special education eligibility decisions. This change alters the way schools approached eligibility decisions. Schools require that all students receive instruction that meets their needs, allowing educators to focus more on how to address a student’s learning
gaps. These gaps reside in an area where a student’s skills are poorly developed or missing, which results in the student lacking essential knowledge (Cohn, 2009). For at-risk students, educators may use the RTI framework as a means to create flexible, homogenous instructional groups that help focus instruction to address students’ learning gaps.

**RTI’s Complex Challenge For Schools**

While Response to Intervention (RTI) has become a focal point for educators across the United States (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster & Saunders, 2009; Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012), fully integrated RTI frameworks remain elusive due to the complexity of implementation and challenges like school cultures (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). RTI implementation is a complex, dynamic process that affects many areas of the school. The implementation of a reform, such as RTI, “cannot be accomplished without fundamental reform in the culture and practice of school” (Kozleski & Huber, 2010, p. 263). One way in which RTI requires adaptations to practice is that it requires a level of collaboration (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016). Teachers and principals need to be active agents in the whole picture of student learning. RTI incorporates a high level of collaboration due to the use of data-based decision making, universal screening, progress monitoring, and allocation of resources to provide interventions for students with deficits (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016; Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Another way RTI requires change is in a school’s teaching practices (Kozleski & Huber, 2010; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). In the classroom, students need to receive effective general instruction. RTI focuses on how teachers respond to individual student’s needs, especially those students underperforming and most at-risk. The implementation of and training on a range of assessments affect a teacher’s ability to assess the needs of students. Some teachers may lack understanding of how to use scientifically-based research to make instructional decisions to meet
the needs of their students (Burns & Gibbons, 2012) or lack training on how to provide instructional support for these students (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016).

RTI is a process that aligns instruction, assessment, and interventions. This alignment helps schools be more efficient and effective in addressing the needs of all learners (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Within this new process, schools identify struggling students earlier rather than wait for them to fail and become too far behind. When implemented effectively and according to best practices, the RTI process addresses the historical shortcomings of the traditional system for identifying at-risk students for learning disabilities (LD) and provides appropriate interventions (Burns & Gibbons, 2012). Typically, special education instruction is completely separate from the general education curriculum and not necessarily aligned with education standards (Cummings, Atkins, Allison, & Cole, 2008; Hoover & Patton, 2008). The RTI process emphasizes the alignment and effective delivery of a general curriculum through a range of assessments, including universal screening tests, progress monitoring, and evidence-based interventions (Swanson et al., 2012). Three times a year, universal screening of students for reading and math skills helps determine students meeting grade-level expectations and those needing remediation. Progress monitoring occurs for students with deficits so that skill is targeted and taught and progress monitored while it is learned (Burns & Gibbons, 2012).

Through professional conversations around student data, students are grouped based upon their specific instructional needs (Burns & Gibbons, 2012; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). A universal screening assessment, such as the Measures of Academic Performance (MAP) in reading and mathematics, is given to students in grades 2 – 12 all around the country. Many school districts use it as an internal measure to determine student progress, track performance, and assess student needs. For example, a student’s universal screening in third-grade
mathematics may show a deficit in understanding the place value of numbers. The classroom teacher sees the same issue in the student’s classroom performance and assessments. The student, along with others needing the same skill, are grouped into an intervention group. Universal screening, progress monitoring, teacher observations, and other pertinent student information and data are part of RTI’s data-based decision making.

RTI implementation may significantly change K-12 public schools to address student needs. Due to RTI’s focus on professional collaboration and teaching practices, a closer look at the RTI model and changes implementation has brought into schools is warranted.

**Response to Intervention Model**

This section describes several elements of the RTI model. First, a general description of RTI is presented to better understand RTI and its origins. Second, RTI’s tiered instruction is discussed because it is a dynamic, complex process that is essential to the model. Third, a brief section highlights RTI’s key components with a more in-depth explanation in chapter two. Fourth, the changes impacting elementary schools due to RTI implementation are discussed. Finally, the impact of RTI implementation on teachers is reviewed. School cultures are briefly examined because they may often be a barrier to implementation efforts like RTI. A contextual description of RTI in New Mexico is provided later in this chapter in its own section.

Response to Intervention and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) are synonymous in the literature (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Balu et al., 2015; Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2016). Response to Intervention and MTSS are interchangeable terms in describing a framework and process of tiered instruction and assessments to address students’ academic and social needs and support the determination of disability (Austin, Vaughn, & McClelland, 2017). Since this
The RTI framework is based upon a public health model of intervention (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). In the public health model of intervention, multiple tiers of interventions are applied to the population. Tiers increase in intensity as the needs become greater in a smaller section of the population. For example, most of the general population receives vaccinations that keep people healthy and safe. A small percentage of the population (10% – 15%) may need more specialized care and individualized treatment. This second level of intervention focuses on that 10% – 15% of the population by providing specific care and health analysis that is catered to the individual’s needs (Cohn, 2009). Finally, there is a third tier of care and intervention for individuals who require even more intensive and specialized care and interventions. Figure 1 below illustrates the multi-tiered framework that includes academic and social systems.

**Figure 1.** Response to Intervention Pyramid: Academic and Social Systems from National Association of State Directors of Special Education (2005)

Students move up and down the tiers as they need more direct and targeted instruction.

The largest portion of the pyramid (at the bottom) comprises proficient students who are...
supported by the general curriculum. Students receive universal screenings three-times a year at this level to determine if they are meeting proficiency benchmarks for their grade and age. The middle portion of the pyramid includes students in need of targeted instruction to address a skill deficit while receiving the core curriculum in Tier 1 (NASDSE, 2005). Progress monitoring takes place at this level to determine if the intervention and instruction are needed, or if a different intervention may be needed, or if Tier 3 instruction is necessary. The top portion of the pyramid is for the few students who need more intense and individualized instruction, plus the core program in Tier 1. Progress monitoring also occurs at this level to determine student progress and whether the intervention is a good match for the student’s needs. Based upon a variety of performance data, a student may be released from Tier 2 or Tier 3 instruction due to effective progress and reaching proficiency in the skill area. The percentages in Figure 1 are approximations that are flexible based upon the needs of the student population in the school (NASDSE, 2005). The suggested percentages should be parameters that educators strive for as it allows the system to function as effectively as possible.

**Response to Intervention’s Tiered Instruction**

In applying the medical philosophy of tiered interventions to education, all students receive effective instruction that is developmentally appropriate within the general education classroom, called Tier 1 instruction. The first level of instruction is the most vital because it is the most likely to improve students’ overall performance (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). At this level, teachers screen for students who may be at-risk for academic and social failure. The staff also screens students to ensure that they are properly responding to and benefiting from the instruction at this level, which takes place in the general education classroom (Burns & Gibbons, 2012). Teachers utilize universal screenings at least three times a year to ensure students make
gains toward grade-level standards. For example, the Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) is a norm-referenced assessment given to K – 12 students three times a year to assess their proficiency in reading and mathematics (NWEA, 2019. Home. Retrieved from https://nwea.org/). During discussions, educators use data-based information, as well as other student performance data, to determine the students who need additional support or enrichment.

Students who show minimal progress in reaching proficiency targets or are non-responsive in their skill development may receive Tier 2 instruction (Burns & Gibbons, 2012; Mellard & Johnson, 2008), which means teachers need to look at a new intervention to help the student. Non-responsive is a borrowed medical term used in education to note that the treatment of instruction did not work, and there is a need to try something in addition to general core instruction or intervention. Students who receive Tier 2 interventions are often instructed on the targeted deficit area with more intense instruction. For example, students who need to work on their decoding skills receive intense instruction focused on the area of developmental need (Denton, 2012). According to Mellard and Johnson (2008), the “frequency, number of minutes a day and number of days in a week, and duration, how many weeks for the intervention” (p. 4) are determined by a school-based team or grade level.

Staff monitors student progress over the course of the prescribed time period, usually six to eight weeks (Cohn, 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Since the student’s learning needs fall below general core instruction, school teams collaborate and monitor student progress. Consultation and communication across these teams are important to ensure proper and timely instructional support for students. Grade level teams or data teams comprised of teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators monitor student progress. The student’s Student Assistance Team (SAT) also monitors progress; SAT school members include the child’s teacher and other
support personnel working with the student and meet with parents or guardians to review progress and make recommendations of supports. Based upon the student’s response to the interventions and focused instruction, a decision is made after the allotted intervention period: (1) if the student meets grade-level expectations, he or she moves back to Tier 1 and exits Tier 2 interventions; (2) if the student is making progress due to the intervention, but still remains behind the grade level, he or she should continue to receive the treatment and is progress monitored; and, (3) the student’s performance shows little or no progress during the intervention period, a more intense intervention is necessary in order to meet the student’s individual needs (Cohn, 2009). A referral for special education testing to determine eligibility for resources at the individual level may be warranted (Burns & Gibbons, 2012; Mellard & Johnson, 2008).

Special education is designed instruction that focuses on meeting the needs of an individual student who has been identified with a learning disability (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). In most tiered instructional models, special education encompasses Tier 3 instruction (Berkeley et al., 2009) because it is, in essence, specially designed instruction addressing academic or social deficits. A distinction between general education and special education is the difference in approach to students. General education tries to support all students and provide remediation in small homogeneous groups. Special education requires an individualized program that is continuously progress monitored. If a student’s needs require more direct support and intervention beyond Tier 2, the student progresses into the most intensive and powerful interventions in the school at Tier 3 (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Students in need of Tier 3 interventions often have social and academic needs. These students typically have severe reading deficits and commonly have challenging behaviors or attention difficulties (Denton, 2012). Most students with a behavioral disorder often have difficulty reading and typically half a year to two
years behind their typical peers (Trout, Epstein, Nelson, Synhorst, & Hurley, 2006). One distinguishing feature of Tier 3 interventions is that the instruction must address the identified need rather than be preventative (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). When a student needs Tier 3 instruction, the teachers know that a specific skill deficit is present, and the student may have a disability in this area. The instruction at this level is individualized to meet their individual education plan (IEP), and not group focused as in general education’s Tier 1 and Tier 2.

A student may reside at different levels within the tiered system. For example, a student may be on grade level for reading and therefore receive Tier 1 reading instruction. However, the same student could have difficulty with math concepts and skills and receives Tier 2 instruction and interventions to address learning gaps in the designated areas based upon the universal screener, classroom assessments, and teacher observations. Because of the student’s struggles in math, the child’s confidence may be negatively impacted. Teachers and parents determine whether behavioral interventions are necessary for the student. For a period of time, this same student receives guidance services through Tier 2 social and emotional supports.

In special education, RTI also serves as a component for disability eligibility determination (Swanson et al., 2012). As part of special education eligibility, students must be provided the appropriate instruction and interventions to qualify for special education. If a student does not have the appropriate instruction and interventions, the student’s lack of performance and achievement are questionable, because the school did not provide the necessary instruction; therefore, a disability cannot be accurately determined (Burns & Gibbons, 2012; Cohn, 2009). If appropriate instruction and interventions do not improve the student’s learning gaps, the presence of a learning disability can be substantiated through an evaluation process that takes into consideration the student’s history, including academic and social progress, and
achievement testing (Swanson et al., 2012). This consideration between achievement testing and student performance is noted as a dual discrepancy (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

Components of RTI

In order to be responsive and proactive to student’s needs, the school needs to implement the core requirements for an RTI model: tiered instruction, universal screening, progress monitoring, and data-based decision making (NCRTI, 2010). The National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI) defines data-based decisions as the “ongoing process of analyzing and evaluating student data to inform educational decisions, including but not limited to approaches to instruction, intervention, allocation of resources, development of policy, movement within a multi-level system, and disability identification” (NCRTI, 2009, pp. 11). Within the framework, data-based decisions that utilize multiple points of student performance shape the allocation of resources to struggling students in the tiered model. Data-based decision making incorporates the scientifically-based instruction, interventions, and assessments being used in the school. Data-based decision making also may include other forms of information such as observation of the student, parents’ information on their child, family or child’s health history, screening assessments from speech and language or occupational therapists, school-based or outside counseling recommendations. Assessment data points are often the universal screening assessments, other classroom assessments, progress monitoring, and teacher’s observations of the student’s performance. Teachers from regular and special education, administrators, and parents work together in this model. To guide these conversations on student performance, researchers (Burns & Gibbons, 2012; Cohn, 2009; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006) also recommend the use of a problem-solving approach or standard treatment that supports teachers with at-risk students.
Elementary teachers resemble first responders who adjust to student needs by “assessing frequently, implementing effective instructional strategies, monitoring progress, and seeking consultation for students whose progress is to slow or halted” (Cohn, 2009, p. 48). Due to the use of universal screenings and progress monitoring for all students, educators provide a means for early detection of at-risk students and allocation of resources through intervention for these targeted students (Hughes & Dexter, 2011). Regardless of the school’s approach to at-risk learners, proactive communication with parents is necessary to enlist them in conversations focused on how to best support each child at home and in school (Burns & Gibbons, 2012).

**Change in School Organizations due to Response to Intervention**

Reutebuch (2008) notes the RTI’s model focuses on improving student outcomes for general and special education students. The goal of RTI is to "prevent academic and behavioral problems and assist in identifying students with specific learning disabilities (SLD)” (Reutebuch, 2008, p. 126). According to Fuchs, Fuchs, and Stecker (2010), the model incorporates the use of procedures with a data-based decision that aligns the school’s curriculum, assessments, instruction, and interventions to federal and state legislations. Many state agencies developed and outlined implementation guidelines for schools to adopt a tiered system of instruction based on RTI systems where a model and components are described (Reeves et al., 2010).

Tiered instruction requires educators to homogeneously group students according to their instructional skills to ensure all needs are met. If students’ skills are deficient in an area, the students must receive more time beyond the core curriculum and direct, explicit instruction in the lacking skill areas. This explicit instruction is usually done in small groups or individually (Denton, 2012). Based upon a MAP reading assessment, a student in fifth grade may need additional support in developing comprehension skills. The student receives additional
interventions at the Tier 2 level, where small group instruction is provided, and progress monitored. In order to know how students are performing in the tiers, educators assess students through universal screenings and progress monitoring (Hughes & Dexter, 2011).

For many schools, the incorporation of universal screening and progress monitoring along with data-based decisions may provide new experiences that demand extensive training for the staff (Hughes & Dexter, 2011; Mellard & Johnson, 2008). The staff’s development and understanding of these new processes shape conversations around implementation with questions and concerns needing to be addressed (Burns & Gibbons, 2012). The use of tiered instruction, including new assessments, such as progress monitoring and universal screenings, and the data-based decision process, affect teaching practices in schools (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Each of RTI’s components create significant change for teachers, particularly due to the demands of their time, scheduling, and meeting the needs of all students (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011).

Since both regular education and special education are more involved with the students that struggle, classroom teachers, special education teachers, interventionists, and other support personnel need more frequent collaboration to ensure a seamless instructional model (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Fuchs et al., 2010). With the move toward a tiered instructional system, it is possible that more students with disabilities will receive services in a general education classroom rather than a separate setting like special education resource rooms (Cummings et al., 2008; Reeves et al., 2010). Due to the change of setting, special education teachers' roles change to an inclusion instructional model where they support more students (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Hoover & Patton, 2008). The special education teacher collaborates with the classroom teacher by providing early interventions to students who may need more academic support, yet do not need special education services, as defined under the old model (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012;
Due to RTI, a significant change in structure and roles takes place between the classroom teacher and special educator (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Shepard & Salembier, 2010). Teachers who work together in the same classrooms need regularly scheduled opportunities to collaborate on student performance, curriculum preparation, and instructional practices (Hoover & Love, 2011). With special educator staff working with at-risk students, they will be helpful if the issue of special education eligibility arises because they have direct contact and working knowledge of the student’s performance and needs (Burns & Gibbons, 2012; Hoover & Patton, 2008).

**Impact of RTI Implementation on Teachers**

For staff, the initial process of implementing RTI may be overwhelming (White et al., 2012). School systems have begun to give universal screenings three times a year. Additionally, targeted students receiving Tier 2 and Tier 3 are assessed, and progress monitored in much more frequent intervals, usually every two to four weeks (Powers & Mandal, 2011; Shepherd & Salembier, 2010). From the teacher’s perspective, the sheer amount of testing and progress monitoring may negatively impact the amount of time for instruction (Greenfield, Rinaldi, Proctor, & Cardarelli, 2010; Shepherd & Salembier, 2010). Upon the first implementation, teachers may believe that RTI strained everyone’s instructional time, schedules, and added more responsibility, such as documented paperwork (Swanson et al., 2012). Adding to this perception, teachers need to progress monitor students in ways that had not done before and to better utilize universal screening reports and progress monitoring data. They also need to assess students receiving Tier 2 instruction at least every four to six weeks. Taking the time to progress monitor students impacts a teacher’s core instruction. Some teachers feel too much progress monitoring negatively affects their ability to properly teach the core instructional program (Mellard &
Johnson, 2008). Also, the paper demands of the SAT process can be more robust and time-consuming. A change in the master schedule makes teachers interdependent on each other because their schedules are synced together. This interconnectedness impacts teacher autonomy and control over their instructional time and schedules. In order to provide times for interventions and teacher collaboration during common planning periods, the chaos of altering the schedule and frustration caused by it needs to be ridden out as the changes are implemented (Dufour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). Transparency of work and accountability to members on one’s team can create tensions and at times conflicts (Greenfield et al., 2010). Due to the changing structures and roles caused by RTI implementation, Mellard and Johnson (2008) found that collaboration of school professionals is an essential practice for an integrated RTI framework.

**School Cultural Factors**

The initial implementation of RTI models into schools focused on three factors: collaborative structures, professional development, and leadership (Rinaldi et al., 2011). Teacher buy-in was one of the most significant challenges for principals (Hoover & Love, 2011). White et al. (2012) suggested that "schools will only be successful with the implementation of RTI if it includes district support, strong school leadership, teacher leadership and buy-in, and clear decision-making and communication" (p. 76). These supports and continuous efforts to ensure teacher buy-in improved the implementation of RTI (White et al., 2012). Teachers were more likely to implement intervention models when they accepted the change and were provided with training and support (Glover & DiPerna, 2007; Greenfield et al., 2010). Within an RTI framework, educators acted to find the appropriate interventions to address learning gaps prior to students falling too far behind (Greenfield et al., 2010). Many schools faced barriers like
insufficient training, resources, and effective skill and knowledge to appropriately progress
monitor student performance (Burns & Gibbons, 2012). Schools were rich in data, but not
necessarily effective in the decision making and analysis of it.

**Summary**

RTI implementation impacts and changes teaching practices and cultures in schools
(Kozleski & Huber, 2010; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016; Reeves et al., 2010; Swanson et al.,
2010). Each day, professionals navigate meeting the needs of all students by utilizing more
scientifically-based curriculum, assessments, interventions, and complex processes, such as
tiered instruction and data-based decision making (Burns & Gibbons, 2012; Mellard & Johnson,
2008). Roles and responsibilities may change due to RTI’s implementation, which may shift or
create new leadership responsibilities (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Burns & Gibson, 2012;
Shepard & Salembier, 2010). Isolationistic tendencies are challenged by the collaborative team
approach required to implement an integrated RTI framework (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).
Furthermore, these new methods and processes may create conflict and tensions among
educators (Greenfield et al., 2010). The school’s culture may create barriers to RTI
implementation. Leadership impacts RTI implementation decisions. Redefining roles impacts
professional interactions among staff. School cultures influence how RTI is implemented. The
next section provides a brief contextual review of RTI in New Mexico.

**RTI in New Mexico**

RTI in New Mexico is an integrated dynamic, complex framework evolving to meet the
needs of students. The section provides more specifics on RTI in New Mexico, and how the
frameworks include all students.
The New Mexico Public Education Department (NM PED) authorized RTI as law in 2007 after IDEA (2004) was passed nationally. New Mexico Public Education Department required schools to implement a three-tiered integrated model where a student’s academic and socials needs would be addressed. NM PED specifically states that all:

New Mexican schools must adhere to the RTI guidelines. Within New Mexico, RTI is an integrated service delivery approach for all students and should be applied to decisions in general, remedial, and special education. RTI is the process that all student assistance teams (SATs) in New Mexico must follow to ensure that schools meet all students’ needs. (NM PED, 2006, p.4)

Research-based instruction and interventions are utilized throughout the pyramid. The state required a research-based core instructional program that supported most general education students. Universal screening three times a year provided staff with baseline data to make informed data-based decisions for students who may need interventions and Tier 2 supports.

In Tier 2, students in need of either targeted academic or behavior interventions received additional instruction in their deficit area. For students receiving Tier 2 instruction, an SAT team, comprised of a classroom teacher and other pertinent staff as designated by the principal, worked closely with the parent to identify the student’s needs and develop an intervention plan. Membership of this team was usually an administrator or designee and other specialist teachers, such as ELL teacher, math and reading teachers, nurse, guidance counselor, psychologist, or speech pathologists. Outside agencies were included on a case by case base as determined by the child’s needs. The intervention plans were reviewed several times a year. The student was progress monitored during tier 2 instruction, and overall performance was measured against grade-level expectations through universal screenings and classroom curriculum assessments. In
these SAT meetings, the SAT team decided if the student made enough progress: to exit Tier 2 instruction, continue receiving Tier 2 interventions, or recommend special education testing to determine if the student has a disability and in need of more intense tier 3 instruction.

According to NM PED and state law, students received special education within Tier 3 (NM PED, 2006). At this level, teachers provided intense, individualized levels of instruction for students. If a student was eligible for Tier 3 instruction, they qualified for special education services. A student received specially designed instruction and related services, as determined by the individual education plan (IEP). The state criteria for gifted services also fell under special education services. If a student did not qualify for gifted or special education services, the student was referred back to his or her SAT team for support. Figure 2 below illustrates New Mexico’s approach to RTI.

![Figure 2. New Mexico's Three-Tier Model from the New Mexico Public Education Department 2019](image)

The inclusion of both the student’s performance and achievement testing was called the dual discrepancy model (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). The dual discrepancy model allowed scientifically-based assessments such as universal screening and progress monitoring data to be included in the special education eligibility discussions. While the RTI framework became a law
in New Mexico in 2007, the dual discrepancy model for K – 3 students became effective in July of 2009 (NM PED, n.d.b). In the state of New Mexico, dual discrepancy for K – 3 students was described as:

A K – 3 student suspected of having a learning disability might, at the evaluator's discretion, still be given the standard IQ/performance test as part of a comprehensive evaluation. However, the student's progress monitoring data from Tier 1 and 2 interventions that establish a dual discrepancy (meaning low or large differences in achievement scores as compared to grade-level peers and a learning rate substantially below grade-level peers) are also incorporated into the evaluation and eligibility determination. (NM PED, n.d.b)

The NM PED provided districts with both an RTI guiding document that had been updated periodically and training at the initial role out of the law in 2007 for district staff. In 2009, special education staff, such as diagnosticians, received training due to the dual discrepancy model’s implementation and need for schools to provide effective interventions to ensure a student’s eligibility for a specific learning disability.

There is a strong need for further research on RTI in school communities that serve more marginalized youths. Evans and Kim (2013) state that risk factors, such as poverty, alter life outcomes for children. More children today live in poverty than any other age group (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016). A child’s readiness for academic and social skills that are necessary for school success is negatively affected (Evans & Kim, 2013). The child presents with underdeveloped skills, usually in language and literacy development, numeracy skills, and problem-solving skills. As a result, their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development are increasingly compromised. Many teachers may not be prepared to address the learning,
behavioral, and emotional problems surrounding a student’s needs, especially when poverty is a factor.

Durlak and DuPre (2008) explain that “the level of implementation affects the outcomes obtained in promotion and prevention programs” (p. 327). They state that more information and context is necessary to determine how factors impact different communities and settings. A multi-tiered framework and interventions provide much-needed support and substantial advantages to students, which is especially true for low-achieving and at-risk students like those found in New Mexico schools (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016). Implementation of and research on the RTI model should take into consideration the cultural issues that affect adoption and implementation of the framework (Miller & Freeman, 2016).

New Mexico is an ideal setting for a qualitative case study on RTI. Most RTI research has been primarily completed in settings of Caucasian students who speak English (Brown-Chidsey, & Bickford, 2016). New Mexico is a very diverse state with African-American, American Indian, Asian/Pacific, Caucasian (non-Hispanic), and Hispanic students. New Mexico has the highest rate of children living in poverty in the country at just under 30% (Nathanson, 2016). Children in this state also experience higher levels of food insecurity than many other places (Nathanson, 2016). The rate of child abuse and neglect in New Mexico surpasses the national average (Nathanson, 2016). Adverse childhood experiences increase the risk of learning and behavior problems (Burke, Hellman, Scott, Weems, & Carrion, 2011). As the impact of the risk factors and intensity increases, children become more likely to face learning and behavioral problems (Burke et al., 2011). The urban elementary school in New Mexico chosen for this study was selected due to its’ academic performance for the past three years and length of RTI implementation and is briefly discussed in the following section.
New Mexico Case Site

The elementary school for this study has implemented an integrated RTI model with academic and behavioral systems of supports. Since 2004, the elementary school staff has implemented social and emotional RTI supports while also implementing and phasing in an academic RTI framework over the past ten years, beginning in 2007. Table 1 describes the school’s profile.

Table 1

School Profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Enrollment of K – 5 Public School (November 2016)</th>
<th>750-800 students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special Education: ~11%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free/Reduced Meals: ~32%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>~ 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian</td>
<td>~ 4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific</td>
<td>~ 2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian (non-Hispanic)</td>
<td>~ 39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>~ 51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employees:</td>
<td>70 – 80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>40 – 45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Staff</td>
<td>20 – 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-instructional Support Staff</td>
<td>0 – 10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

~ means approximation

The elementary school recently received a score of A on the A – F state rating system for the 2014 – 2015 school year. The state report noted that the elementary school’s highest and lowest performing students exceeded growth targets on the PARCC assessment in comparison to their
peer groups (NM PED, n.d.b). It is one of twelve schools in the state that demonstrated high levels of growth in student improvement for the highest and lowest performers and overall school student growth. In 2015 – 2016, the school received a B. Student improvement scores for the highest and lowest performers exceeded state benchmarks. Over three years, the school earned a B in 2014, an A in 2015, and a B in 2016. The school’s average grade is a B over those three years.

New Mexican schools are navigating federal laws like IDEA (2004) and RTI implementation. Schools “face the challenge of complying with numerous initiatives at the federal, state, and local levels” (Mellard & Johnson, 2008, p. 12). At the state level, significant changes to teacher evaluation and the implementation of K – 12 Common Core Standards impact schools. Locally, new curriculums in English Language Arts and math, universal, and progress monitoring assessments comply with RTI and special education laws. Implementation of both Common Core Standards and teacher evaluation practices are controversial in New Mexico, as well as nationally. Due to the numerous initiatives, school systems continue to be challenged by policy incoherence. Often, policies are interpreted with their own meaning and may not necessarily relate to each other. This incoherence among policies creates a fragmented approach to educational programming and student learning. When schools are able to organize and integrate these policies within the school, a level of coherence is achieved between policy institutions and schools.

The school site for this study has also undergone some curricular changes. In New Mexico, Common Core Standards were adopted in 2010 (NM PED, 2015a). The NM PED phased in the Common Core Standards in both English language arts (ELA) and mathematics over three years, starting in 2012 with full implementation across K – 12 by 2015 (NM PED,
Grades K – 3 implemented ELA and mathematics standards in 2012, while grades 4 – 12 began effectively utilizing these standards the year after in 2013. The state provided training and implementation supports for districts. Much of the work at the elementary school level revolved around building and district teams would support professional development for teachers in guiding implementation of the ELA and mathematics Common Core Standards in the schools and classrooms. Teachers in grades 4 – 5 started the implementation of ELA and math standards the following year. In the spring of 2015, a new assessment tied to Common Core Standards, called the PARCC assessment, was introduced in grades 3 – 12.

The state requires districts to begin grades K – 8 ELA and reading interventions adoption process where the state reviews and ensure it aligns with Common Core Standards and is a scientifically-based curriculum. While these curriculum reviews happen in cycles, RTI impacts the selection process due to the rigorous and scientific-based expectations for core curriculum and interventions. The NM PED requires districts to adopt and review their math curriculum by summer 2018. The District has reviewed and adopted new curricula aligned to Common Core Standards for ELA in spring 2016 and mathematics in the spring of 2014. The special education department adopted a specific reading program for at-risk, special education students in Tier 3 instruction for ELA in spring 2016. District professional development and training were provided to both general education and special education staff implementing these core curricula and interventions.

Summary

Students with exceptional skills, academic, and behavioral needs are supported through the RTI framework and SAT teams in the school setting. Resources need to be allocated to address each student’s learning gaps. This process includes students who excel and may qualify
for gifted instruction. A student with a gifted qualification falls under special education in New Mexico. Under this framework, RTI “includes interwoven networks of services that students access as needed so that they can be successful in school” (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016, p. 89). Educators in New Mexico navigate new standards and mandates to better meet student’s needs by providing earlier interventions that address student’s learning gaps through an integrated RTI framework. With RTI’s implementation, roles and responsibilities of staff shift and change to meet the demands of all students (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Burns & Gibson, 2012; Shepard & Salembier, 2010). In order to meet the needs of all students, RTI affects teaching practices, such as instruction and collaboration in data-based decision making and leadership processes (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). To implement an RTI framework in schools, changes need to take place that is both structural and value-based (Rinaldi et al., 2011). Collaboration among educators and leadership, from principals to teachers, is critical to the implementation of an integrated RTI model (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

**Conceptual Framework**

Kurt Lewin (1951) is viewed as one of the pillars in organizational development, change, and learning. One noted scholar calls Lewin “the intellectual father of contemporary theories of applied behavioral science” (Schein, 1988, p. 239). Through his study on organizations and learning, Lewin (1951) developed a model that supported a framework for organizational change. In Lewin’s (1951) change model, the human psyche undergoes three stages of change: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. Initially, actors create the motivation for change, which motivates people within the organization to identify with the new behaviors, information, and attitudes that ultimately result in the development of a new culture. Communication across the
organization is focused and clear around the new patterns of behavior. The change in the organization “refreezes” the new behaviors. This establishment of stability transpires through structures, rewards, and communication. Schein (1988) expands upon Lewin’s theory and modernizes it. He elaborated on issues pertaining to psychological and cultural conditions, such as relationships, organizational learning, and cultures that better match the needs of this study.

Many of the organizational change theories to date are in alignment. Within them, change is viewed as a process (Fullan, 2007b; Lewin, 1951; Schein, 2010). These researchers’ theories emphasized the need for the organization to change across a three-step change process (Fullan, 2007b; Lewin, 1951; Schein, 2010). Each of these seminal change theorists notes how the change process moves through stages, where the need for initial implementation affects the organization to change, and eventually, new ways of performing and behaving are established over a period of time (Fullan, 2007b; Lewin, 1951; Schein, 2010). In this process, members initiate change; members learn and adjust to new processes and behaviors; members stabilize the system by institutionalizing the new changes in behaviors, knowledge, values, and beliefs into the organization. Organizational culture and its influence on the organization or school is noted for its importance to the change process in Fullan and Schein’s change theories (Fullan, 2007b; Schein, 2010). Organizational culture plays a significant role in the change process (Schein, 2010).

Given the RTI model may represent substantial change, this study is framed by the literature on change theory (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016; Gibbons, & Coulter, 2016; Miller & Freeman, 2016; Russell & Harms, 2016). Schein is a renowned scholar on change efforts, and his research is utilized in this study due to the challenges of educational and organizational change presented in schools. Schein’s stages of change are described in the next section to show
how it impacts implementation efforts, like RTI. Fullan is renown for educational change efforts. His ideas on reculturing and interactive factors for implementing change also underpin this study. Since Schein (2010) and Fullan (1995; 1998; 2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; 2007b) discuss the importance of leadership in change efforts, leadership research is briefly reviewed.

The next sections present seminal theorists Schein’s Stages of Learning/Change, Fullan’s understanding of educational change, including his idea of reculturing and its connection to Schein’s Stages of Learning/Change, and leadership. Leadership is examined due to its importance in the change literature and RTI implementation.

**Schein’s Stages of Learning/Change**

Edgar Schein’s Stages of Learning/Change focuses on different periods of organizational change. His work is rooted in Lewin’s theory of organizational change of unfreezing, change, and refreezing (Schein, 1996; Schein, 2010). Within Schein’s model, cultural change must occur to change the organization (Schein, 2010). Disequilibrium in the organization or motivation for change causes the organization to move into the first stage of change called unfreezing. During this stage, members begin the process of learning new concepts, when survival anxiety is high. Next, stage 2’s changing begins with cognitive restructuring or redefinition. The cognitive restructuring provides behavioral changes and new knowledge by redefining roles, identity, and encouraging trial and error learning. As a result of stage 2, members of the organization learn new concepts and adapt old concepts with new meaning in their work and performance. During stage 3, behaviors refreeze as positive results reinforce the new behavioral practices and culture. Figure 3 below illustrates the change progression, as outlined in Schein’s theory.
Figure 3. Schein’s Stages of Learning/Change from Schein (2010).

When an organization “unfreezes,” Schein (1996; 2010) describes how leaders create motivation or readiness to begin change. To “unfreeze,” the organization may face a gap between what is and what the members of the organization think are happening (Schein, 2010, p. 300). Additionally, external information may be used to unfreeze members into action and respond by changing their behaviors and habits. In order to bring people along, leaders need to develop a safe environment for individuals to accept this change and eventually embrace it (Schein, 1996; Schein, 2010). Individuals must feel safe and proceed without fear of backlash or being humiliated or ridiculed. This sense of psychological safety for individuals within the organization is imperative prior to moving toward the next stage of change. As the organization moves toward the second stage of learning and changing, Schein (1996; 2010) emphasizes that the old concepts and standards are abandoned and replaced by new behaviors and expectations. The people undergoing the change look toward other role models or examples for replication or transferring of ideas. The staff learns by finding solutions as a group through trial and error learning experiences. According to Schein (2010), “refreezing” of the change transpires once the members learn and internalize the new behaviors and norms into their own identity. As members
within the organization accept their new roles, teachers motivate others they interpersonally work with to feel comfortable with change. By analyzing a case site with a developed integrated RTI framework at a refreezing stage, the study did determine how RTI changed the actions and behaviors of the individuals of the school organization.

In Schein’s three-staged model, leadership plays a significant effort in managing the change effort (Schein, 2010). For this study, leadership is broadly defined as a process or practice, not a position. Schein emphasizes the importance for leaders to be able to break old patterns of behavior and former practices. Leadership also needs to understand the depth and significance of the change. In leading educational change efforts, leaders within schools, especially principals, need to proactively enlist all stakeholders that may be involved in this change effort. It remains imperative for leaders to lead the organization throughout the change process. Leaders are better positioned to listen to concerns and communicate the intended goals and outcomes effectively. Change goals need to be concrete problems that organization members can be empowered to address. In applying Schein’s change model to schools, leadership needs to be actively involved with all stakeholders that would be affected by the change. Teachers need time and support to learn and accept the reform. Principals should provide members the tools to understand and support the changes being made in the school.

Leaders need to be aware of the cultural consequences of change (Schein, 2010). The essence of a school culture provides a means for a shared learning experience for individuals and groups within the organization. Schein (2010) describes culture as “a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaption and internal integration” (p. 18). The shared experience of the organization filters the changes taking place. After groups interpret the change, leaders need to coordinate, align, and integrate the
differentiated subcultures. If these new patterns of behavior work well for the organization and obtain positive results, they are taught to new members in order to shape ways to perceive, think and feel in relation to problems facing the organization (Schein, 2010, p. 18).

Schein’s Stages of Change/Learning suggests that the change process occurs in phases. RTI implementation takes place in phases as it progresses from initial implementation to a fully working framework. This study examined RTI implementation using Schein’s Stages of Learning/Change. Since the school has implemented an integrated RTI model for eight years, where both academic and social instruction and interventions are in place, the new practices in the school refreeze or re-culture itself. White, Polly, and Audette (2012) describe how effective implementation of RTI impacts teaching practices in schools, leadership, and the school's culture. While the initial culture of a school will be impacted, the successful implementation of a new initiative, such as RTI, may change the original culture once fully implemented (Datnow, 2005).

**Fullan and Educational Change**

Seminal educational change theorist Michael Fullan (1995; 1998; 2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; 2005; 2007a; 2007b) worked extensively with educational systems to adapt to the increasing academic and social demands of educating students. His work focuses on how educational change in large school systems may or may not lead to better outcomes for students. Fullan (1995; 2001; 2002a; 2007a; 2007b) believed that educators should learn to do new things in the settings in which they work; the change processes needed to be ingrained into the daily work of educators so that relationships and professional learning would improve across the organization. To enact educational change, Fullan (2001;2002a; 2002b; 2002c; 2007a; 2007b)
emphasized that a shared meaning is necessary to understand and move the culture of the organization.

When cultures are vulnerable to the change process, they must reculture (Fullan, 2007b). Fullan’s concept of reculturing connects to Schein’s stage 3 refreezing, where new beliefs, behaviors, interpersonal relationships, and the ability to self-identify emerges. Fullan (1995; 1998; 2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; 2007a; 2007b) and Schein (1996; 2010) both recognize that culture and leadership affect all aspects of a school or organization. Therefore, culture and leadership are two areas that need to be considered in the conceptual framework.

Reculture. Many people view public schools as insulated institutions that are resistant to change (Elmore, 1996). However, when large, sweeping initiatives are incorporated, this view may not hold. In particular, RTI has been shown to significantly affect the practice and culture of schools (Miller & Freeman, 2016); therefore, the use of theories that address both practice and culture is essential for the study of RTI. Schein’s (2010) theory examines how organizations learn and change through overlapping stages. How culture affects the organization change process is a component of his model and is necessary to consider when studying the organizational change in schools.

Ward and Burke (2004) defined school culture as “the traditions, beliefs, policies, and norms within a school that can be shaped, enhanced, and maintained through the school’s principal and teacher-leaders” (p. 1). Fullan (2007b) described how education change could lead to the institutionalization of new cultures and behaviors in schools over time. During institutionalization, he noted that a school needed to reculture itself. Reculturing implied “how teachers come to question and change their beliefs and habits” (Fullan, 2007b, p. 25). Reculturing relied upon “building relationships, building knowledge, and striving for coherence.
in a nonlinear world” (Fullan, 2001, p. 44). Reculturing transpired at the latest stage of Schein’s Stage of Learning/Change, where behaviors, values, beliefs, and culture “refreeze” within the organization. The new behaviors, knowledge, and culture became the way the organization now works. Fullan (2007b) also outlined factors that impact a school system, which was used in this study. These factors, such as leadership and the principal, supported how a school organization interprets and moves toward implementation and reform.

**Role of Leadership.** To make educational change take place, Fullan (2002a; 2002b; 2002c; 2007a; 2007b) emphasized the importance of leaders. Leaders of change needed to establish a moral purpose for change and understood the change process. To succeed, the leadership needed to improve relationships throughout the organization. Leaders also ensured the coherence of purpose and practice for stakeholders, while creating opportunities for new knowledge and behaviors to replace old ideas and habits (Fullan, 2001; 2002a; 2002c; 2007a; 2007b). Fullan (2007b) described how change is not a linear, but a dynamic process that may take anywhere from five to ten years.

Effective leadership in schools was essential for educational change and improvement to student outcomes (Fullan, 1995; 1998; 2001; 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; 2007a; 2007b; 2010). Effective leadership from principals played a central role in implementation efforts. Principals remained a key role in the allocation of resources, schedules, and the sustainability of the change effort overtime. Principals also navigated competing agendas that schools faced from local boards, state agencies, and national governments.

With the different priorities from a variety of stakeholders, principals must find a way to establish a cohesive vision and message for the school community and staff. While leadership is often found in the principalship position, instructional coaches and other leadership roles held by
teachers may support the educational change effort and organizational learning that needs to be undertaken. Through relationships and new behaviors, principals and teachers adjust and implement meaningful change that improves student outcomes. For this study, leadership is defined as a practice, not a position. Due to the importance of leadership in organizational and educational change efforts, this study specifically analyzes leadership in the case site.

**Summary**

Schein’s Stages of Change/Learning are ideal for examination of RTI implementation. Both Schein (2010) and Fullan (2007b) saw the need for great change to organizational cultures, which evolved from Lewin’s (1951) stages of change model. Fullan’s (2007b) change theory was not selected in its entirety because of its focus on larger systems.

The focus of this study is at the school level, not at the district level. Since the case school has implemented an integrated RTI framework for six years, these practices are more stable and refreeze. After six years of implementation, the school organization refreezes with new cultures, behaviors, routines, and knowledge. Fullan’s understanding of the change process and his notation of reculturing of beliefs, relationships, and school’s culture intertwines with Schein’s change theory that also emphasizes the need for cultures to be supplanted by the organization’s new way of performing and working. The use of reculturing in this study is deliberate, as Fullan’s ideas support understanding educational and organizational change. It provides a more dynamic look at the later stage of organizational change from a school level. Reculturing and refreezing prioritize an internalization of new values, behaviors, knowledge, and a new way of doing the work.

The theorists emphasize the importance of leadership to communicate, guide, shape, and reinforce expectations throughout the change process (Fullan, 2007b; Schein, 2010). Often,
many changes in organizations in Schein (2010) and Fullan’s (2007b) perspectives are superficial, usually focused on structural changes. To make lasting change, both researchers see the need to change cultures and the behaviors of employees (Fullan, 2007b; Schein, 2010). Since a fully integrated RTI framework requires a problem-solving approach for decision-making, more robust data collection, and evidence-based practices (Bohanon, Goodman, & McIntosh, 2011; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016), administrators and teachers are forced together into collaborating and addressing students’ needs in new ways. Therefore, this study explores how RTI implementation affects leadership, teaching practices, and collaborative processes in an elementary school.

Since long-term studies remain scarce in the field, this study described the case site’s perceptions and experiences on an integrated RTI framework after many years of implementation (Gibbons & Coulter, 2016; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016; Miller & Freeman, 2016; Scollins, 2016; Wixson, 2011). The change to structures and master schedules may increase collaboration amongst staff but may cause conflicts with historical behaviors of isolationism (Fullan, 1996). In a school setting, Fullan (2001) explained that isolationism was the practice of complete autonomy and reinforced teacher individualism; he believed it was the enemy of improvement. Bean and Lillenstein (2012) explained that the culture of schools needed to change from “isolation to one in which they function as a team: working to set high expectations for the students they serve, implementing effective instructional practices, and always evaluating their work as a means of improving student learning” (p. 500). A balance between individual professionalism and group collaboration was needed (Fullan, 1996). Professional development for staff, the pace of implementation, and leadership may facilitate change or develop barriers in schools (Fullan, 2000). Due to the challenges and mixed results of effective implementation
(Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008), the examination of an RTI model at the elementary level after many years of implementation was necessary.

**Problem Statement**

RTI implementation requires the organizational change at many levels within the school organization (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016; Gibbons & Coulter, 2016; Miller & Freeman, 2016; Russell & Harms, 2016). Federal and state mandates on RTI required schools to adapt to more proactively address students’ instructional needs. In states like New Mexico, where academic and social-emotional instructional supports are provided to all students in a tiered model, RTI implementation of an integrated framework represents a significant change in educational processes and teaching practices (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Teaching practices, leadership from teachers and administrators, and collaboration of professionals should change in order to support all students’ needs and comply with the law’s interpretation. (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

Comprehensive reforms that bring school change, such as RTI, are difficult to implement and often meet resistant cultures (Datnow, 2005; Datnow & Stringfield, 2000; Huberman & Miles, 1984; Vernez, Karam, Mariano, & DeMartini, 2006). With RTI being mandated in the state of New Mexico, staff roles and responsibilities may change in conjunction with challenging isolationistic tendencies often found in schools (Burns & Gibson, 2012). Roles and responsibilities among staff members change, and structures evolve to support student achievement and the professional learning of staff (Bean & Lilienstein, 2012; Shepard & Salembier, 2010). Interviewing staff and observing collaborative teams like SAT teams, grade-level or data teams, and an instructional leadership team may provide insights into RTI implementation and the reculturing in the school. By gaining perspectives from a long-term RTI
implementing case site, barriers to implementation may be identified and explored if the school overcome them. This information would further reinforce or expand understanding in the literature of RTI implementation and school barriers.

The research does not yet provide sufficient evidence or guidance as to how to implement an integrated RTI framework over time (Gibbons & Coulter, 2016; Miller & Freeman, 2016; Reynolds & Shaywitz, 2009). There remains minimal research on the factors that support the long-term implementation of RTI into schools. This qualitative study would address gaps in the literature by examining RTI at a school with at least six years of implementation. With eight years of implementation at this study’s case site, the RTI framework is beyond the initial years of implementation and is more stable. The case site has likely become more stable in terms of Schein’s (2010) refreezing and Fullan’s (2007) reculturing notions. The case site appears to be at a stage of change where the teaching practices, leadership, and collaborative structures focused on student learning and achievement refreeze or reculture in the organization.

RTI studies remain narrow in scope and thus far have focused on implementation efforts of a school within the first three years (Dupuis, 2010; Greenfield et al., 2010; Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Stuart, Rinaldi, & Higgins-Averill, 2011; Swanson et al., 2012). These studies examine individual areas of implementation like the components of RTI, leadership, general education, or special education teachers’ perceptive or professional development. Wilcox, Murakami-Ramalho, and Urick (2013) analyzed teacher’s perceptions of RTI implementation over a five-year period. There remains a limited amount of research beyond five years of implementation (Schulte, 2016). Additionally, more efforts need to be done in order to see how the complication of components fit into one integrated model (Erchul & Ward, 2016; Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012; Schulte, 2016).
With the implementation of an integrated RTI framework in New Mexico, school staff integrates curriculum, instructional tools and strategies, assessments, and professional development to support researched-based teaching practices that best support student achievement (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2015). Mellard and Johnson (2008) explain how “RTI represents a significant instructional shift for many schools that requires coordination of processes at the school and teacher levels” (p. 124). To adapt teaching practices to meet the needs of all learners, teachers and administrators each play unique roles in this change effort by matching resources, instruction, and analyzing student assessments (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016; Mellard & Johnson, 2008). For this study on an integrated RTI system, the coordinated response of staff and leadership are areas to analyze further and will add to the literature (Harn et al., 2011).

Although extensive research has been done nationally on RTI in areas such as universal screening (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012), the process and procedures related to how the staff makes decisions around student needs remains less clear in the literature (Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2016). Research is needed to see how schools engage in these student conversations. More can be learned around how a case site approached sustainability to continuously improve the RTI framework in areas such as classroom instruction, data-based decision making, progress monitoring, and interventions for students. Another area for research is student trajectory, specifically after receiving RTI interventions. The long-term effects of how these students performed over time would expand the literature. Finally, there remain significant questions around the feasibility of implementing RTI systemically across all grade levels (Preston et al., 2016). The case site may be able to address some of these long-term questions surrounding RTI implementation.
Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the impact of the implementation of a multi-tiered RTI system in an urban elementary school in New Mexico. This research provides a more advanced view of RTI implementation. The following research questions reflect these implementation issues:

1. How did an urban elementary school in New Mexico implement an integrated RTI model?

2. How did the implementation of the integrated model of RTI change teaching practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?

3. How did implementation of an integrated RTI framework change leadership practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?

This study explores the lessons learned through semi-structured and focus group interviews, researcher observations, and document analysis focusing on teachers and administrators’ professional perspectives on the implementation of an integrated RTI framework at an urban K – 5 elementary school located in New Mexico, to gain an understanding of RTI and its impact.

Most schools start implementing a concept of the model within academics, such as reading or social supports (Hollenback & Patrikakou, 2014). This case study examined a school at least six years into its implementation of an integrated RTI framework, where academics and social supports are applied to meet student needs. The school also demonstrated positive student growth, as noted by the state grading system for the past three years. This research provides a more advanced view of RTI implementation.
**Significance of the Study**

McIntosh and Goodman (2016) state that guidance for implemented RTI frameworks remains scarce in the literature and resources for educators interested in an integrated approach are even scarcer. Due to this gap in the research, ineffective or mixed results of RTI implementation efforts are more likely to occur. This study explores how to better understand the perspectives of educators during a long-term RTI implementation of an integrated model that impacted their teaching practices, school leadership, and school culture. This study may help others undertaking such implementation efforts to see how the organization evolved and recultured itself into an integrated RTI model.

This qualitative case study adds to the existing RTI literature by exploring a case sites’ perspectives and experiences on RTI beyond the initial three-years of implementation (Schulte, 2016; Scollins, 2016). By focusing on a school site that has undergone years of RTI implementation in both academics and social interventions, questions around barriers, and successful implementation were explored. Areas such as teaching practices, leadership, collaboration, and professional development were examined to see if and how these components supported long-term implementation efforts.

The study may help examine some critical issues still pertaining to RTI implementation and collaboration. Clarification of how staffs’ roles and responsibilities shift due to collaboration, such as data-based decision making and other team-focused efforts to support student achievement. For example, researchers (Preston et al., 2016) explain that one issue concerning RTI implementation is how the roles between special education and general education function in a schoolwide system focused on supporting all students. McIntosh and Goodman (2016) stated the need for more RTI research on understanding how teams played a
role in implementation efforts. In schools, the staff is part of numerous teams, such as SAT teams, data teams, and grade-level teams. This study examines the experience of collaborative team efforts that were supported by RTI implementation.

Additionally, there are questions on several RTI processes (Preston et al., 2016). First, data is needed that explains how staff address student data-based decision making, particularly if the staff utilize a two-stage screening process to reduce false-positives in the identification of students needing Tier 2 instruction. Second, more research is needed on how the staff fully implement RTI schoolwide. To implement RTI schoolwide, the case site’s experience with collaboration, professional development, leadership roles, and responsibilities across multiple grade levels is important to examine and understand. Also, more research is needed to understand more about students who continuously need Tier 2 instruction and interventions. Questions in the research remain on how schools intend to support and possibly evaluate these at-risk students. In New Mexico, gifted education is part of special education. If students are high achieving or identified gifted, research remains limited regarding if or how schools address enrichment and challenge in classroom settings and whether they provide school-wide opportunities and supports for them.

Positionality Statement

My thirteen years of experience in public education has allowed me to witness firsthand the importance of early intervention. While working in my previous position as an Assistant Principal in New Mexico, I saw the challenges the school, students, staff, and parents faced. This study took place in the district in which I previously worked. In my time at the district, I collaborated with the staff to implement many features of an RTI framework into an elementary school. I worked with teachers on data-based decision making, SAT processes and meetings, and
matching interventions to student needs. Schedules, roles and responsibilities, and resource allocation all came into play while the school reorganized to support professional collaboration and address cultural issues in the school. As a researcher, I needed to reflect and balance my experiences and biases of RTI implementation due to my own professional experiences. My goal is to listen to the experience of others as much as possible rather than interject my own ideas. I want to understand their journey with RTI.

I deeply respect the people I have worked within the district and at the elementary school. As a researcher, I balance my respect and collegial relationships in the district and at the building site. With this mindset, I need to reflect on the research and data that is gathered, as I categorize the data and solidify my conclusions. Member checking the data helped ensure the validity of the research. The pursuit of knowledge is important; therefore, I need to be aware of bias in my approach to the gathering and analysis of data.

In my career, I strongly advocate for at-risk students and the need for early intervention. Whether in regular or special education, I believe that students can be successful given the right supports. In schools, some teachers disregard students who may be different, such as those in special education, ELL, or title services. Parents with a child in special education may be overwhelmed by their needs. ELL students may still be adjusting to living in America and speak a language other than English in their home. As a result, this makes them feel alienated in their school. In my professional experience, generational poverty is a real problem facing students. Some parents have a difficult time providing food and resources for their children’s education. Teachers may be frustrated by the parents’ inability to nurture the student. I am familiar with staff who do not always show compassion for all students. These people often judge the parents and students harshly because they did not have the necessary supports and resources, therefore
viewing their problems as inapproachable. Early intervention can change a student’s life trajectory, but “only a fraction of students will obtain the skills and credentials necessary to join the middle class” (Louise, 2007, p. 2225).

I have seen students remain in their impoverished neighborhood. From the students who kept in contact with me over the last twenty years, I see the reality of inequality and generational poverty. Pallas (2000) states that the social structures, specifically educational attainment, and credentials, are the pathways for students to obtain access to jobs and a certain quality of life. In this study, I navigated and reflected on my own personal biases, but especially when I am gathering information and draw conclusions around RTI and students who are most at-risk.

My heart believes in teachers and students; they cultivate amazing relationships. Teachers matter, and instruction in the classroom matters. Working together to change outcomes for those most at-risk and changing the negative statistic into a positive one is one of the most important acts of education. I hoped to understand better how schools meet the needs of all students from this research study.

**Definition of Terms**

*Culture:* “A pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaption and internal integration” (Schein, 2010, p. 18). If these new patterns of behavior work well for the organization and obtain positive results, they are taught to new members in order to influence and shape their ways to perceive, think, and feel in relation to problems facing the organization.

*Data-Based or Data-Driven Decision-Making:* “The process of collecting, analyzing, and summarizing information to answer a question and to guide, develop, implement, and evaluate an action, usually in relation to the analysis of curriculum, instruction, and interventions” (NM
PED, 2009, p 124). Individual student needs are reviewed constantly. In an RTI framework, data-based decision making is continuously done throughout the school year. Universal screening data, progress monitoring, and other student performance data are utilized in this decision-making process.

*Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act was reauthorized and renamed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015. The federal statute continued to mandate testing requirements listed under the 2001 reauthorization. However, states received more control and input into accountability systems than under the previous act of 2001. In this reauthorization, states and local authorities were affirmed for curriculum standards, student results, and school improvement.

*Fidelity*: “Can be defined as how implementation occurs, or the manner and quality which a program or practice is implemented” (Arden et al., 2017, p. 275).

*Individual Education Plan (IEP)*: A student who qualifies for special education services receives an education plan that outlines the student’s educational goals and services.

*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*: Federal legislation involves supporting students with special education needs. It has been reauthorized several times (1997, 2004). The latest reauthorization of IDEA (2004) was called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEAI) of 2004. This is the federal statute relative to public education and services to students with disabilities ages 3 through 21. Students qualifying for these services receive an Individual Education Plan (IEP).

*Intervention*: “Any change to increase the intensity of instruction that targets specific skills. Changes can be made in the areas of program, time, grouping, or instructor skill level” (NM PED, 2009, p. 127).
No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB): The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was reauthorized and renamed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. It is the federal statute relative to K – 12 public education required more accountability of states through high stakes testing in reading and mathematics.

Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS): “A system of school-wide practices that teach, encourage, and reward positive student behavior and that have a prevention focus. Individual behavior plans fall under intervention plans” (NM PED, 2009, pg. 128). PBIS is also known as Positive Behavioral Supports (PBS).

Problem-Solving Approach/Team: “An approach to an academic and/or behavioral problem that utilizes a team that comes together to consider a student through specific data, brainstorm possible strategies/interventions, and develop a plan of action to address a student-specific need. In New Mexico, the Student Assisted Team (SAT) supports and monitors students receiving Tier 2 instruction,” as long as they are not on an IEP or 504 Plan (NM PED, 2009, p. 128).

Progress Monitoring: Students receiving targeted intervention and instruction in Tier 2 and 3 receive progress monitoring to determine the skill progression of each student. Students receiving more intense instruction and additional support are monitored more frequently, usually at least monthly. Decisions regarding support are guided by the progress of the student that is recorded, charted, and monitored for a period of time to see if the instruction is addressing the student’s skill deficit (Denton, 2012). Progress monitoring student data is used in data-based decision making at SAT or IEP meetings.

Reculture: Fullan (2007) describes reculture as “How teachers come to question and change their beliefs and habits” (p. 25).
**Research-based practices:** “Research-based material, instructions, and interventions that have been used with a large sample of students and have demonstrated a positive correlation between the intervention and student progress. The results may have been documented in peer-reviewed literature or by a panel of experts through vigorous, scientific review” (NM PED, 2009, p. 101). This concept is also referred to as scientific-based or evidence-based instructional practices.

**Response to Intervention (RTI):** “A multi-tiered organizational framework that uses a set of increasingly intensive academic or behavioral supports, matched to student need, as a system for making educational programming and eligibility decisions. It is a continuum of school-wide support that contributes to overall comprehensive school improvement efforts” (NM PED, 2009, p. 129).

**School culture:** “The traditions, beliefs, policies, and norms within a school that can be shaped, enhanced, and maintained through the school’s principal and teacher-leaders” (Ward & Burke 2004, p. 1).

**Student Assisted Team (SAT):** “A school-based team that serves a student for whom Tier 1 core instruction and interventions have proved ineffective. The SAT gathers all available data about the student, hypothesizes a possible cause for the problem, and then designs an individualized SAT intervention plan and/or behavioral intervention plan (BIP) where necessary” (NM PED, 2009, p. 129).

**Tiered Instruction (Tiering):** “Tiering is a differentiated instruction strategy and is considered an intervention. Tiered instruction happens when teachers teach and/or students work on different levels of activities toward a common objective/standard depending on skill
readiness, learning preferences, and interest levels. Tiered instruction or tiering in this context is not related to Tiered Model below” (NM PED, 2009, p. 130).

**Tiered Model:** “A common model of three tiers that comprise an overall RTI framework and delineates how a school or system organizes to deliver instruction based on student need” (NM PED, 2009, p. 130). Tier 1 instruction is understood as the general curriculum delivered in the regular education classroom. Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction are homogenous groups that target student learning gaps or missing skills. Tier 3 instruction meets more often and for longer durations than Tier 2 interventions. In New Mexico, Tier 3 encompasses special education instruction.

**Universal Screening:** “A variety of assessments that are administered to all students in the first weeks of school, and then again three to four other times during the school year as a way to identify at-risk students and/or to adjust instruction” (NM PED, 2009, p. 130). Universal screening data is used to assess general classroom instruction, as well as individual student needs. Data from these assessments are used in data-based decision making.
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the impact of the implementation of a multi-tiered Response to Intervention (RTI) system in an urban elementary school in New Mexico. This research provides a more advanced view of RTI implementation. The following research questions reflect these implementation issues:

1. How did an urban elementary school in New Mexico implement an integrated RTI model?

2. How did the implementation of the integrated model of RTI change teaching practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?

3. How did implementation of an integrated RTI framework change leadership practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?

The purpose of the study is to understand the impact of a multi-tiered RTI system in an urban elementary school in New Mexico. A qualitative case study explores the lessons learned by focusing on teachers' and administrators’ professional perspectives on the implementation of an integrated RTI framework at an urban K – 5 elementary school located in New Mexico. This qualitative case study examines RTI’s impact on the current leadership implementing RTI and the perspectives of administrators and teachers who have experienced it.

Most schools implement single or multiple concepts of the RTI model in academics, such as reading or social supports (Hollenback & Patrikakou, 2014). This case study examines a school at least six years into the implementation of an integrated RTI framework where academics and social supports were applied to meet students’ needs.
Research Process for Literature Review

In learning about RTI, I reviewed the literature through a variety of sources. I began my search by gathering information about RTI by reading journal articles. I reviewed the literature in areas that discussed the components of RTI, such as progress monitoring. Much of the literature found resulted in articles describing research that highlighted efforts and interventions that addressed students’ learning gaps, typically in the area of reading. As I learned more about RTI, I broadened my search to look at other aspects of it like mathematics, special education concerns, and positive behavior interventions that address the social and emotional needs of students. I also reviewed several books and articles on the subject from some of the leading authors in the field, such as Mellard (Mellard, & Johnson, 2008; Mellard, McKnight, & Jordan, 2010; Mellard, McKnight, & Woods, 2009), Douglas Fuchs and Lynn Fuchs (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010; Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). I reviewed information on several key terms in relation to RTI, such as implementation, perceptions, tiered instruction, multi-tiered system of supports, interventions, and leadership.

In reviewing the literature on educational reform and organizational change, Elmore (1996; 2000; 2005) and Fullan (1996; 1998; 2000; 2002; 2007) are both leading experts on educational change. In reviewing organizational literature, culture became an area to explore. Lewin (1951), Litwin (1947), and Schein’s models (1995) for organizational change were reviewed, with Schein’s model being used for this study. Educational leadership also was explored through books and journal articles that highlighted the importance of principals as significant players in educational change efforts (Elmore, 2005; Fullan, 2007; Hallinger, 2003; Hargreaves, 2004; Meyer, & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Schein, 2010; Spillane, 2005; Spillane, 2009; Stuart, Rinaldi, & Higgins-Averill, 2011).
Introduction

Response to Intervention, as a systematic process, is defined as the provision of effective instruction to address a social or academic deficiency prior to qualifying a student for special education (Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap, & Hemmeter, 2010; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Reading instruction and development are the primary focus at the elementary level (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011). Historically, schools have overqualified students into special education (Johnston, 2011). Almost 80% of referrals for special education include reading issues (Johnston, 2011). There is supporting evidence for schools that utilize RTI models not only improve students’ early reading skills but also reduce special education referrals and/or placements (Fox et al., 2010; Greenfield et al., 2010). Academic behaviors are also noted to improve, such as time-on-task and task completion (Fox et al., 2010). By implementing RTI, schools have the opportunity and obligation to provide earlier interventions to address these learning gaps. From several studies (Hagan, 2008; Harn, Linan-Thompson, & Roberts, 2008; Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008), researchers noted several early reading development interventions that, when supported with progress monitoring, fostered positive outcomes for students. Professional collaboration and training, along with the allocation of resources to address students’ needs are also important to note and explore in the literature (Allingham, 2011; Harn et al., 2011).

Scope and Organization of this Review

This literature review highlights the significance of research in the following broad areas: educational policies, RTI, organizational change, and educational change theory. First, the literature notes educational policies of the RTI framework, specifically, the interconnections of two federal laws, NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004), through which RTI is examined. Second, the literature review identifies RTI’s impact in schools by examining core tenets in the RTI section,
the benefits of the framework, and educators’ perceptions of it. Due to the complexity of RTI in public schools and the emphasis on collaboration in the model, the literature review also analyzes professional learning communities. Last, organizational change and educational change literature are reviewed due to the study’s focus on implementation and change. School cultures and leadership are analyzed more in-depth in the section on organizational and educational change theories.

**Educational Policies**

Response to Intervention (RTI) is rooted in two federal policies, No Child Left Behind (2001) and reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004). This section of the literature review briefly describes the laws and their relationship with RTI.

**No Child Left Behind**

In 2001, bipartisan legislation enacted the reauthorization of the ESEA, also called the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). This new law brought about a major federal expansion of accountability onto schools that "intended to raise educational achievement and close racial/ethnic achievement gaps" (Darling-Hammond, 2007, p. 245). With the rise of federal accountability measures in the NCLB (2001), schools became charged with meeting proficiency standards in reading and mathematics for all populations of students starting in third grade (Galvin, 2007). NCLB (2001) created high-stakes standardized testing that demanded 100% of all students reach State determined proficiency levels by the year 2014, regardless of gender, socioeconomics, special education, and race. This focus on schools provided more attention to all groups of students (Darling-Hammond, 2007).

Yet with all its grand hopes for all students to be proficient, many concerns remained. One of the several concerns of many state entities and educators was that the unfunded mandate could
not live up to its inspirations due to the financial inequities across schools and the penalties placed onto schools that often served the neediest student populations (Darling-Hammond, 2007). If student performances did not improve, a school was labeled as failing, because student performances across the defined categories did not meet the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) benchmarks (Darling-Hammond, 2007). A school could “fail” even if the majority of their students performed at the proficient level. A below proficiency number by a subgroup, such as special education or low socioeconomic, would earn the school a failing grade.

Another concern raised was the perception by the general public of the American Public Schools being a failure as benchmarks are missed. Darling-Hammond (2007) stated at least 80% of all schools in most states would not meet the AYP targets for performance, thus further labeling the majority of public schools as failures (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Due to the problems in meeting the accountability requirements in the law, 38 states and Washington D.C., have been awarded waivers from NCLB in 2012 (Elliot, 2013; West, 2013). If schools do not meet AYP, penalties such as the loss of federal funding exasperated schools that were already underfunded in comparison to higher-achieving, affluent communities (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Even after interventions and support by the state, schools that continued not to meet AYP standards could be taken over by the state through corrective action. Teachers and principals could possibly lose their jobs if they were taken over by the state.

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act**

In the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004, the legislature body considered the LD Initiatives concerns about the over-reliance on IQ testing in special education eligibility decisions and the dispositional rate of minorities in special education. Historically, discrepancy models that used IQ tests have been scrutinized (Reese,
With dispositional rates of students qualifying for special education services (Skiba et al., 2008; Sullivan et al., 2009), RTI was developed in response to the misuse of the discrepancy model and issues surrounding IQ tests (Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008). The governing body still decided to continue to allow states to qualify students through IQ discrepancy testing. The previous language around specific learning disabilities remained consistent with the previous law. Yet, a new provision within the reauthorization of IDEA (2004) was introduced as an alternative method for special education qualification, called Response to Intervention (RTI). The reauthorization of IDEA (2004) changed the focus of the law from the child's intellectual ability to the child meeting age or grade-level standards as designated by the State (Zirkel, 2006). The shift in language toward a standards-based expectation purposely aligned IDEA with NCLB (Zirkel, 2006). RTI provided schools with a process to better meet the needs of their student populations and the demands of AYP within NCLB. The reauthorization of IDEA became known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004).

While RTI had become part of the national education policy (Berkeley et al., 2009), Fuchs and Vaugh (2012) examined some of its main accomplishments and lingering questions in schools. One significant success of RTI implementation was the rate of which schools utilize screening methods to identify at-risk students. Universal screening tools for academic areas in mathematics and reading development skills were more available and utilized in schools. Additionally, progress monitoring tools were more available at the school level, but educators had not integrated these best practices as effectively as universal screening. Even with years of preventative instruction and implementation, the effectiveness of RTI in addressing at-risk students was unclear (Fuchs & Vaugh, 2012). Since its inception, implementation of an RTI
framework required “a different sort of climate in the school and a change in how educators teach, learn, and interact with others” (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012, p. 492) to meet the needs of at-risk students. The impact of a fully integrated model remained elusive (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). The Response to Intervention Pyramid noted below for reference.

![Response to Intervention Pyramid](image)

*Figure 1. Response to Intervention Pyramid: Academic and Social Domains from the National Association of State Directors in Special Education (2005)*

**Response to Intervention**

In this section, the literature review describes the most significant components with regard to RTI and the framework’s benefits. The RTI framework addresses academic learning gaps, as well as the social and emotional skills of students, which educators call Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Research describing the influence of PBIS in elementary schools is provided. Steps for successful implementation are noted.
Core Components of Response to Intervention

Each of the core components of RTI is examined in this section. Tiered instruction, universal screening, progress monitoring, and data-based decision making are explained. Problem-solving approach and standard protocols for team decision making are described. While fidelity of implementation is not a core component, it is discussed in relation to the effectiveness of the RTI framework.

Tiered instruction. As a multi-tiered service delivery model, RTI was mostly viewed as a three-tier model (Cohn, 2009). Within Tier 1, students received a researched-based instruction on the general education classroom (Cohn, 2009; Cummings et al., 2008). Universal screening of all students helped the staff determine which students were at-risk for learning gaps (Hughes & Dexter, 2011). Students who were at-risk for not making enough progress in the first Tier would be considered for Tier 2 that provided more intense interventions and supports in conjunction with access to the general curriculum in Tier 1. Students received Tier 2 instruction that directly targeted their deficits, while supplemental instruction continued in the general education classroom at Tier 1. During Tier 2 interventions, students participated in small group instruction, usually one to five students. Students in Tier 2 who failed to respond to the provided interventions, were referred for a comprehensive evaluation through special education to determine if the student had a learning disability (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Depending upon the results, the student qualified for and received specialized instruction from special education staff trained in the areas of need. Tier 3 interventions provided more intense, specialized instruction that was often associated with special education. Due to the multi-tiered model of delivery, the instruction was differentiated to meet the varying needs of all learners within the school (Denton, 2012).
Under the RTI framework, students must be instructed in the general education setting with high-quality research-based instruction (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Teachers from the general education setting actively monitored student progress and assessed the effectiveness of the instruction based upon the students’ performance. Schools employed a universal screening tool for academics and behaviors that guides the staff’s decisions on which students need closer monitoring and possible interventions (Hughes & Dexter, 2011). In elementary schools, Tier 1 instruction for math and reading was viewed as sacred blocks of class time (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Instructional periods for reading were at least 60-90 minutes a day, while math classes were about 60 minutes a day (Cohn, 2009). In a well-developed core curriculum, teachers instructed students with discover learning, problem-solving, guided, and independent practice. Within both Tier 2 and Tier 3, research-based interventions in the area of need were implemented according to the intervention’s design. Students were flexibly grouped across homogenous skills to meet the instructional needs better.

Tier 2 interventions were delivered to students within the classroom setting (Burns & Gibbons, 2012; Cohn, 2009). In the classroom approach, the general education teacher provided Tier 2 interventions to small groups of students (Denton, 2012). The targeted interventions explicitly addressed the student’s learning gaps. To accomplish this intervention approach at the elementary level, students switched classrooms for the teachers to form homogenous groups of at-risk students (Cohn, 2009). However, some form of flexibility was necessary if students required a different approach, which may entail a different setting. If necessary, a student could receive Tier 2 interventions outside the classroom.

Another approach utilized grade level or schoolwide intervention blocks of time (Cohn, 2009). These intervention periods were 30 – 45 minutes long each day. Any student that required
supplemental services received at this designated time in the school schedule (Burns & Gibbons, 2012; Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011). Other students, who were deemed not at-risk, participated in enrichment activities or other kinds of instruction determined by the classroom teacher (Burns & Gibbons, 2012). However, no new skills or instruction took place during this time, as that would perpetuate learning gaps for students out of the classroom. For some schools, teachers instructed at-risk students in the tier with a scripted, researched-based reading or math program. These programs often had progress monitoring components. Tier 2 instruction, which supplements the instruction from Tier 1, targeted the student’s deficit areas that were analogous to giving a patient a round of antibiotics to improve their health.

**Universal screening.** Schoolteachers administer the universal screenings to determine if students are progressing in the curriculum at an appropriate rate and to identify any students who may be at-risk for learning gaps, especially in the areas of math and reading (Cohn, 2009). Students, who needed additional support, received a double-dose of instruction in the missing or underdeveloped skills. In administering the universal screening three times a year, school staff gave students interventions at the start of the year, if they were at-risk to catch any students slipping in their performance as the school year progresses (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). For example, screenings on behavior examined a student’s tardiness, while an academic screening at the elementary level determined a student’s ability to read a list of high-frequency words. For a screening tool to be effective, it needed to be accurate and efficient. The goal of the screening tool was to identify students at-risk (Cohn, 2009). Within RTI, the universal screening tool helped to prevent learning problems from becoming entrenched learning gaps because the teachers used the screening tool to gauge the effectiveness of the instruction in Tier 1. Multiple
data points, such as formative assessments and summative assessments in addition to the universal screener, needed to be used to determine a student’s progress.

The efficiency of the screening tool was also essential because the measurement tool needed to be easily implemented (Burns & Gibbons, 2012). When used, the screening tool was brief and reliably administered. The universal screening was conducted three times a year, usually in the fall, winter, and spring. To address the issue of falsely identifying students as being at-risk, it was recommended to progress monitor these targeted students for six weeks to ensure they were truly at-risk (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2012). Because the screening may over or under identify at-risk students, educators needed to maintain accurate data on how their screening identified students across the educational spectrum. Another important factor in determining the screening process success was the measurement’s cut scores that divided students between potentially at-risk and those who were not at-risk (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011; Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Adjusting the cut score affected the tools for accuracy and effectiveness when identifying at-risk performers (Hoover & Love, 2011).

**Progress monitoring.** Progress monitoring is a key component of the RTI model (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). To determine if the instruction was effectively improving learning, teachers routinely collected and analyzed evidence of student performance. Progress monitoring was part of the data collection process that helped teachers and administrators make informed decisions around individual student needs and classroom needs (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011). Mellard and Johnson (2008) explained how progress monitoring was a scientifically based practice of assessing student’s academic performance on a regular basis for two purposes: to determine whether students were befitting appropriately from the instructional program and build more effective programs for students who were not benefiting from the present instructional
program. In the RTI framework, progress monitoring provided important student performance data that assisted school teams in making decisions about what level or type of interventions would be most appropriate for an individual student or group of students (Hughes & Dexter, 2011). Progress monitoring was viewed as a “valid and effective tool for gauging the effectiveness of instruction and providing important information for eventual classification and placement decisions” (Mellard & Johnson, 2008, p. 44). Progress monitoring data also supported the necessary documentation for special education eligibility.

Progress monitoring occurred in all tiers of instruction within the RTI framework. Additionally, these measures directly correlated with the skills depicted within the curriculum that the student was demonstrating learning gaps (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). According to Mellard and Johnson (2008), more than one tool was utilized to encompass the skills of the curriculum, grade level, or tiered instruction; assessments for progress monitoring were easy and efficient to administer. Some computer-based options were appropriate for use and eased implementation efforts (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). In order to use and understand the progress monitoring data, the results should be able to be analyzed and displayed in a manner that makes the evaluation of student performance efficient. Staff needed to determine cut scores and decision-making rules to help guide decisions around a student’s response to an intervention. Line graphs charting progress were an effective display of performance (Burns & Gibbons, 2012). Progress monitoring data was only one part of the student’s performance. Teachers needed to consider other criteria and evidence in their decision-making and analysis.

It is important to note that progress monitoring differs from universal screening. Universal screening is a proactive screening process that is used at least three times a year for all students to determine students at-risk. Progress monitoring happens more routinely, usually for
those at-risk (Cohn, 2009). Progress monitoring remains a critical component of RTI, because “research has documented that teachers who routinely measure student progress, analyze results, and adjust their instructional practices accordingly have higher student achievement than those who do not” (Mellard & Johnson, 2008, p. 46). This effort monitors a student’s progress in relation to the curriculum and grade level expectations where learning gaps occur or are perceived. These measurements that can be taken on a weekly basis need to be analyzed and reviewed by the classroom teachers. If inadequate student progress is demonstrated, the instruction may need to be reevaluated and possibly changed (Cohn, 2009).

Progress monitoring in Tier 2 determines several important outcomes. While routinely done at this level, teachers utilize the data to make some informed decisions (Burns & Gibbons, 2012; Mellard & Johnson, 2008). The student’s performance will determine the course of action and intensity of supports. If progress is made to the point where gaps are minimal, the student is returned to Tier 1 and exits Tier 2. If the student is responding to the intervention and needs more time to eliminate the gap, the intervention could continue. A change in intervention and instruction is necessary when a student is unresponsive to the intervention or shows limited growth due to it. Staff may refer a student for an evaluation to determine if the lack of progress is due to a disability and necessitate special education services.

In special education, progress monitoring services similar but different purposes than in Tier 1 and Tier 2. The systematic, reliable, and multiple data points of progress monitoring help inform special education eligibility decisions (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). If a student is eligible for special education services, the data points to guide the development of the specially designed instruction provided through special education and outlined in the child’s Individual Education Plan (IEP). Progress monitoring is required in determining if a student meets the short-term
objectives and annual goals within the IEP, which are reviewed annually over a three-year period.

**Data-based decision making.** Professionals in schools utilized student data and observations to make informed decisions around student needs (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011). Within RTI, data-based decisions by educators followed either a problem-solving approach or standard treatment protocol (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Researchers (Burns & Gibons, 2012; Cohn, 2009; Mellard & Johnson, 2008) recommended that schools utilize both approaches to meet the needs of their student populations best. Shepard and Salemhier (2010) described how an elementary school utilized both a problem-solving process and standard protocol that focused on a team of educators utilizing student progress data to make informed decisions around individual and group instruction and interventions.

**Problem-solving approach.** Most schools already employ a team of educators to support individual students who need a plan to enhance their performance in the general education classroom (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). These teams are called student support teams, student study teams, student assistant teams (SAT), or building assistant team. A problem-solving approach under RTI requires these teams to utilize student data within their process and provide for consistent evaluation of progress. According to Mellard and Johnson (2008), these teams are most effective when the student’s performance is directly described so that skills and deficits can be measured.

In a study, the use of curriculum-based measures (CBM), a progress-monitoring tool, supported the skills and deficits type of measurement (Denton, 2012). As interventions were implemented to address learning gaps, the team met for follow up discussions to evaluate the success of the instruction and plan (Sailor, 2009). Based upon the student’s response to the
interventions, the student continued with current service and support or modified. The interventions were terminated, adjusted slightly, or a new plan of interventions was designed out of the follow-up meeting. If more intense supports were necessary for the student to make appropriate progress, a student might be considered for further evaluation through special education testing. In New Mexico, these teams were often called the Student Assistance Team (SAT). The staff worked collaboratively with families to make decisions around an individual student’s needs.

To overcome the limited research on the positive outcomes of this approach, Mellard & Johnson (2008) recommended several effective practices for implementing a problem-solving model. In a study on special education teachers’ perceptions of RTI, Cummings et al.’s (2008) findings recommended that teams utilize effective forms of collaboration between general education, special education, and other staff. These parties needed to continuously monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention, which was supported by research and designed to target the student’s deficits. Bean & Lillenstein (2012) noted similar conclusions in their study on educators’ perspectives from five schools that recently implemented RTI. From the data gathered, collaboration across staff was essential for RTI implementation (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). Through the collaboration across staff, they developed, implemented, and monitored the student’s performance and shared the assessments with the problem-solving team, which often included the student’s parents (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). Collaborative teams needed to gather information about the student from a variety of sources, including present and past teachers, parents, and other adults who knew the child’s academic and social development. The plan and implementation of interventions had to be clear to all parties working with the student. Under these conditions, the problem-solving team developed, implemented, analyzed, and evaluated the
applied interventions through ongoing professional conversations based upon the collaboration amongst teachers, parents, and administration (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012).

In the past, the problem-solving team developed plans for students on a case-by-case basis. Given the size of schools, a grade-level team discussed and determined student needs more efficiently (Sailor, 2009). This team required a means to ensure students get the necessary supports and resources. Through grade-level teams, a problem-solving process took place where all students were discussed (Sailor, 2009). In a study on RTI implementation by Shepard and Salembier (2010), the researchers found that by working as a team at the grade level, isolation tendencies for one teacher to be responsible for a student in his or her classroom was eliminated, because the collective members considered all students together. Grade level teams met at least monthly to discuss programming for students and necessary supplemental intervention (Burns & Gibbons, 2012). Additionally, the team discussed student performance in conjunction with progress monitoring data (Sailor, 2009). Based on current performance and gathered results, the team of adults made decisions on programs and interventions for students. A standards treatment protocol helped guide these conversations around student performance and the allocation of interventions and other resources to students (Burns & Gibbons, 2012).

**Standard-protocol approach.** Standard treatment protocols are a term used in the medical profession (Cohn, 2009). In medicine, procedures determine how the medical staff treats certain health-related problems. These protocols are continuously evaluated for their effectiveness and impact on helping patients. With new academic research and performance data from observations and ongoing assessments of students, educators review or adjust protocols to provide the best care and instruction for all students.
Despite a school’s staff’s best effort in instructing Tier 1, they anticipated some elementary students would struggle to learn how to read and write (Cohn, 2009). By establishing a standard protocol to approach at-risk students, a school staff systematically addressed student’s needs in an effective and efficient manner (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Mellard & Johnson, 2008). The use of standards-based protocol expedited the staff’s ability to proactively get interventions to students at the first sign of distress in learning essential skills. These common learning problems, such as struggling to read decodable words, were uniformly addressed based upon the appropriate treatment that had been identified by the school and research as most effective for at-risk learners. The goal was to correct the learning gaps as they arose before the student fell significantly behind his age-level peers (Burns & Gibbons, 2012).

If interventions were not actualizing the desired student results, other tiered interventions could be implemented. When discussing a student’s performance and progress monitoring data through either approach, teachers and other staff had to analyze between six and eight data points (McCook, 2006). To make informed and reliable decisions around a student’s particular needs, multiple data points were necessary because they showed progress or limited growth over time, as well as how far behind the student was in relation to the standards set against typical peers (Cohn, 2009). A move to the next tier or special education evaluation may also be recommended.

**Fidelity**

While not a core component of the RTI framework (National Center on RTI, 2010), each staff member needed to implement core instructional and interventions with fidelity (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). To properly implement RTI, schools adopted a system of interventions, progress monitoring, and processes that focused on student learning. Within this framework, a service delivery model developed by a school ensured that students received the supports when they
needed them. Teachers faithfully instructed students according to the expectations established at each tier, which supported the validity and reliability of the RTI framework (Cohn, 2009). In several studies, the professional development of staff was imperative if fidelity measures for interventions were to be effective and implemented correctly (Denton, 2012; Shepard & Salmbier, 2010).

Failures in education reform often were attributed to poor implementation (Elmore, 1996; Fullan 2007b); therefore, the fidelity of implementation for RTI was extremely important. Fidelity of implementation was described as the delivery of instruction in the manner that it was intended and designed (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Mellard and Johnson explained that fidelity of implementation was also “how closely the prescribed procedures of a process were followed” (p. 117). When schools do not implement change initiatives with fidelity, the results were often discouraging and ineffective, according to a study on high or low implementation rates in schools (Kovaleski, Glicking, Morrow, & Swank, 1999).

To ensure fidelity to the process and implementation, schools needed to maximize the effectiveness of RTI by consistently implementing across classrooms and grade levels (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Educators selected interventions and instructional practices that demonstrated a strong research-base for improving student learning. Additionally, students received instruction as designed and intended by the program or intervention. These actions together ensured fidelity to the program and provided high-quality instruction to the student (Sailor, 2009). For the special education process, students received effective instruction as part of the eligibility criteria.

For RTI implementation to be supported, teachers needed professional development and training, such as workshop in-services along with coaching sessions (Denton, 2012; Mellard & Johnson, 2008; Shepard & Salembier, 2010). In several studies on RTI implementation, coaches
and mentor teachers played an important role in ensuring fidelity to the RTI processes (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Shepard & Salembier, 2010). Staff recognized these teachers as members who had expertise in an area or were leaders in the school setting. These teacher leaders needed some authority to enact change. The school leadership assured the teachers that they had the proper resources and time to make necessary adjustments during the implementation of the RTI framework (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). School leaders developed a collaborative environment that supported student learning and teacher improvement (Burns & Gibbons, 2012). To foster this type of environment, teachers could not feel threatened by the evaluation process. Instead, the RTI implementation developed all members to be empowered and active participants. Under the RTI framework, teachers, parents, and administrators were all accountable to each other and the children they supported.

Yet even with strong leadership and research to support RTI implementation, some teacher’s attitudes caused them to not effectively follow through with the new procedures and processes established within the framework (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). If teachers fundamentally believed that RTI would not work, implementation efforts became vulnerable. The teacher’s beliefs and teaching style might be contrary to the emphasis on collaboration and data decision-making process through progress monitoring and universal screening (Greenfield et al., 2010). Isolationistic behaviors and teacher’s opinions, in their minds, were more important than the RTI processes (Sailor, 2009). Some of the general education teachers supporting at-risk students encountered culture shifts in the school. Progress monitoring and data-decision making, as well as supporting all learners, were not the training teachers had received in their careers. Therefore, school leaders and teachers had to find ways to continue discussions around their perceptions of RTI and the changes that result. By establishing a safe environment, school staff
needed to openly address significant differences that were rooted in various teaching philosophies and approaches toward supporting all learners.

**Response to Intervention Benefits**

The benefits to RTI at the elementary school level primarily had been discussed around students’ positive outcomes, especially in academic areas of reading improvement and social and emotional interventions through the PBIS models. (Hughes & Dexter, 2012; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016; Schulte, 2016). Academically, RTI studies on reading had shown that at-risk students greatly benefit from planned interventions (Hughes & Dexter, 2011; McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Researchers also noted decreased special education referrals and eligibility for students (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016; Scollins, 2016). However, Hughes and Dexter's (2011) meta-analysis of several RTI studies showed mostly flat special education referral rates, yet a few studies that had small decreases. In the literature regarding PBIS, the researchers noted the following student improvements: decreased disruptive behaviors, increased demonstration of social competencies, improved school climate, and improved emotional regulation (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

**Successful factors for RTI implementation**

Hughes and Dexter’s (2011) extensive analysis found that positive RTI results had the following supporting factors: “extensive, ongoing professional development, administrative support at the system and building level, teacher buy-in and willingness to adjust their traditional instructional roles, involvement of all school personnel, and adequate meeting time for coordination” (p. 10). To be successful at RTI implementation, Gibbons and Couter (2016) explained that through their work in schools and at the district level, several things had to take place:
• Principals must be instructional leaders of the school by leading staff through RTI implementation;
• Staff had to focus on instruction and ongoing support through coaching; and,
• Teachers needed the training to collect and analyze student data and schoolwide data.

Professional learning and development should be continuously provided to the staff. Districts had to support and pace implementation in schools because RTI was a system-wide effort. Schools should develop tiers of instruction and intervention supports.

**Current Challenges and Weakness to RTI Implementation**

The Institute of Educational Sciences released a large-scale evaluation of RTI implementation (Balu et al., 2015). The evaluation included information from 1,200 elementary schools in 13 states. Impact schools selected for the study implemented RTI for at least three years. Additionally, these impact school implemented RTI without additional funding sources, which was different than many published articles on RTI, due to the fact that research teams or a grant with funding may have impacted the published research at the site level (Stahl, 2016). In the data, elementary schools consistently utilized universal screening tools (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Stahl, 2016). The effectiveness of RTI assessment teams improved significantly when members included the expertise of educators, such as literacy coaches, school psychologists, and other specialists that understand reading development or student assessment (Stahl, 2016). Of note, almost 70% of elementary schools in the evaluation serviced students at or above level within intervention groups and supplanted core reading instruction by requiring students to
attend intervention groups rather than classroom instruction. (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Stahl, 2016), therefore wasting resources and ensuring students missed valuable core instruction.

While the national evaluation on RTI (Balu et al., 2015) failed to be optimistic, the context of the information needed framing. Specifically, the national evaluation was not a full review of an integrated model and had a limited scope with regard to student performance. The national evaluation of RTI only examined reading skills and narrowly analyzed student performance. Findings were inclusive of the benefits to the targeted students. Fuchs and Fuchs (2017) noted several concerns in the evaluation report regarding a limited scope by examining RTI in the area of reading development and including results only in grades 1, 2, and 3. Additionally, researchers (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Stahl, 2016) explained the range of students used in the report was extremely narrow because students just above and below cut scores were used. The report failed to provide a full view of RTI in relation to reading performance, as students below and above-identified cuts were not included. For example, the lowest and highest performing students were not included in the evaluation because their scores fell out of the range.

While the national evaluation presented some information on RTI implementation, more detailed information was necessary to complete a full picture of the complexity of implementation efforts (Balu et al., 2015).

Through the national evaluation’s descriptive site visits, the report did shed light on some issues pertaining to RTI implementation (Balu et al., 2015). The evaluation’s descriptive nature of elementary school’s daily practices with RTI provided some insights into current challenges to implementation. In current practice, RTI confounded many teachers and administrators (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). One of the major concerns was that students were not receiving the appropriate instruction (Balu et al., 2015; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Stahl, 206). Students receiving interventions
were missing core instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Stahl, 2016). Therefore, students with the greatest need were not provided the instruction and intervention opportunities to shrink the gaps and catch up to their peers. Furthermore, students pulled from core instruction inadvertently caused a new gap of learning, because they missed essential core instruction to receive the intervention that they may or may not need (Balu et al., 2015; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Stahl, 2016). Teachers and administrators needed to understand the difference between differentiated instruction from interventions, as teachers’ confusion led to ineffective instruction and intervention for at-risk students (Stahl, 2016). Because students who were proficient also were identified for interventions (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Stahl, 2016), data analysis teams had to work more effectively to identify students most in need of reading support (Stahl, 2016).

Creating change due to RTI implementation was one aspect of the model, but leading this change process to improvement was another (Cavendish, Harry, Menda, Espinosa & Mahotiere, 2016). For the implementation of a change process, the quality of fidelity to implementation was often cited as the main reason for the success or failure of the reform effort (Fixson et al., 2005). The RTI implementation efforts often faced challenges due to fidelity issues (Arden et al., 2017). Often, these fidelity issues resided in the following RTI areas: monitor assessments and intervention procedures, decision-making rules, and allocation of resources for interventions (Arden et al., 2017). These are similar problem areas noted in the national study (Balu et al., 2015). These miscues on instruction and misidentification of student need negatively impacted student performance and jeopardized RTI implementation.

District leadership also impeded a school’s RTI implementation efforts (Freeman, Miller, & Newcomer, 2015). District leadership supported communication, professional development training, and the allocation of resources to support the implementation. If there was no support
from the district, principals and teachers were left to their own knowledge and experiences to implement RTI effectively.

With the identification of students in mind, the allocation of resources and decision-making processes had to improve at the building level. Schools that performed better in these areas had staff beyond the classroom teachers support at-risk students (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Stahl, 2016). Educators with reading expertise and knowledge of assessments had to be included in enacting the vision of an RTI framework. Challenges in implementation noted by researchers (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017; Stahl, 2016) focused on issues of time and staff allocation. Time issues pertained to scheduling interventions and ensuring instruction was not supplanting core instruction. Staff also had to engage in effective data-based decision making to identify students most at-risk and ensure proficient students did not receive interventions. Schools implementing RTI required substantial amounts of support for training and ongoing coaching for staff (Adren et al., 2017). Time for these professional conversations took place at least three times a year, where all students were discussed. The ongoing conversation focused on students needing additional support and adjustments that were warranted to their instructional program. Lastly, the availability of staff with expertise in reading was necessary to address the reading needs of students.

From her analysis of the national evaluation on RTI, Stahl (2016) found that the data appeared to show elementary schools drifting away from effective RTI implementation. These results were surprising, as states like New Mexico adopted Common Core Standards, new teacher evaluation systems, and mandated assessments, such as the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College or Careers (PARCC) for grades 3 – 12, and in addition to the reading assessments on Istation for grades K – 3 were end of year assessments for music,
physical education, and art (Stahl, 2016). Often local, state, and national policies competed for time in schools (Fullan, 2007b). Effective long-term implementation of RTI was compromised due to the lack of fidelity to the framework (Pierce & Jackson, 2017) and the convoluted nature of competing policies at the school level (Fullan, 2007b). Each of these issues negatively impacted a school’s ability to implement RTI.

Nichols, Castro-Villarreal, and Ramirez (2017) explored teacher’s perceptions and understanding of RTI in an integrated framework at two urban case sites. Their study found that teacher’s experienced “four areas of concern: (a) challenges and worries associated with differentiating instruction and behavioral management, (b) lack of support, guidance, and training, (c) conflicts between RTI processes and the state prescribed curriculum standards, and (d) RTI duration” (p. 14). Some of the concerns are similar to those found in the national RTI evaluation and in the literature (Balu et al., 2015; Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014; Hollenbeck & Patrikakou, 2014; Stuart et al., 2011). The latter two concerns addressed alignment issues among state, districts, and elementary school processes and procedures. Teachers’ perceptions of fidelity issues pertaining to RTI processes and procedures aligned with other studies (Arden et al., 2017; Cavendish et al., 2016).

Dallas (2017) found that the sustainability of systems related to the change process of implementation, specifically from initial implementation to the institutionalization of new approaches. Systemic sustainability was the process of practices in a school that start after initial implementation that become overtime institutionalized in the school’s practices, culture, and procedures. Dallas (2017) described a major concern in relation to staffing allocation, schedules, and RTI implementation. For example, “remedial education to close an existing achievement gap inadvertently may be exposed to a new opportunity for an additional gap to form. This gap is a
result of missed exposure to the vital grade-level curriculum in lieu of intervention opportunities” (Dallas, 2017, p. 112). Ineffective service delivery models and problems pertaining to schedules continued to impede adequate RTI implementation efforts and practices. Based upon the national evaluation of RTI from 2010, Gersten, Jayanthi, & Dimino (2017) found that the evidence suggested students on the cusp of meeting the benchmark or cut score were harmed by receiving Tier 2 interventions. Tier 2 interventions work when implemented with fidelity (Gersten et al., 2017). Over identification of students in need of intervention caused problems for schedules and allocation of resources. Additionally, the selection of intervention support had negatively affected a student.

The second concern focused on how student data gathered and analyzed. Some students were not getting the support necessary due to the ineffective identification of students and allocation of resources. The teams deciding on targeted interventions were missing at-risk students. These problems with effective instructional and intervention delivery models were noted by other research (Balu et al., 2015; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017).

A study by Cavendish et al. (2016) found that broad areas challenged the staff’s ability to implement the RTI framework. The RTI process and knowledge, external factors, and assumptions around students and families were areas to impede school-based implementation efforts (Cavendish et al., 2016). The data showed the staff lacked general RTI knowledge, such as understanding of the tier instruction and intervention. The shifts in roles and responsibilities generated conflicts and resistance in the staff. Confidence for implementation was negatively affected due to the staff’s lack of RTI understanding. Additionally, the training opportunities lacked a proper roll-out and introduction of RTI. Poor planning and limited ongoing training, according to teachers, impacted their knowledge and confidence. The use of assessments
overwhelmed teachers when making decisions concerning student needs. The RTI record keeping and legal requirements created a more convoluted picture of RTI and challenged staff implementation. Negative assumptions around student performance and needs affected implementation (Cavendish et al., 2016).

In schools, educators had to balance what was effective with what was functional to establish and maintain an RTI framework (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). “Successful implementation of RTI models depends on changed attitudes and beliefs, appropriate assessment and instructional methods, intensive and long-term professional development opportunities, and adequate resources” (Cavendish et al., 2016, p. 26). Otherwise, fidelity to implementation efforts was impeded, and schools continued to struggle when implementing an RTI framework (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017). To enact behavioral changes at the building level, staff required the space, time, and the ability to troubleshoot problems as they occurred (Arden et al., 2017).

A team approach was essential for implementing RTI. Teams of educators gathered the assessment data, developed plans to address curricular and individual student needs, and refined and reassessed their work to improve practices and student performance (Arden et al., 2017). Ongoing coaching and feedback to teams implementing RTI were embedded into daily practice within a school. New knowledge and skills were applied, and feedback provided so that teachers and administrators continuously adjusted and learned how to meet and react to the needs of students. Barriers also had to be identified (Cavendish et al., 2016). It was also necessary to recognize and address possible barriers, such as resistant teachers or silo teachers, into system implementation efforts so that teachers and administrators improved implementation and sustain the change process.
Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) is part of the RTI pyramid (Sailor, 2009). PBIS is a systemic method where educators increase the likelihood of students to adopt, use, and sustain effective behavioral practices (Muscott, Mann, & LeBrun, 2008). When applied across a school, School-Wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) help establish behavioral expectations throughout the school and identifies the social, emotional, and behavioral supports necessary to nurture the academic and social growth of all students (Horner et al., 2009). Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports and SWPBS are interchangeably used in schools that implement behavioral practices based upon a three-tier system.

Behavioral interventions implemented across the school were linked to improved social outcomes. From a longitudinal study on PBIS impact on students, Nelson et al. (2009) found that a student’s socioeconomic status had an influence on his or her standing in a three-tier behavioral model. Students of lower socioeconomic status (SES) required more behavioral supports and interventions than their typical peers.

School discipline continued to be a challenge in schools, but especially for students who identified as having persistent behavioral problems. Ethnicity reporting within the schoolwide intervention and support systems presented a concern that Blacks and Hispanics were disproportionately disciplined for similar infractions than their White counterparts (Runge, Lillenstein, & Kovaleski, 2016). As with academic learning gaps, problem behaviors existed on a continuum, where students acted in a disrespectful or disruptive manner. The degree of noncompliance by students varied but the number of incidents in schools was growing (Muscott et al., 2008). To address this increasing concern, a PBIS system required positive approaches to intervene when students had to be taught and reminded about appropriate behaviors rather than
relying on punishments alone for reinforcement. The level of challenging behavior demonstrated by the students required the appropriately matched intervention.

Tier 1 of the RTI model, the primary level, established a social culture that perpetuated appropriate behavior. To establish such a culture, school-wide expectations were taught and reinforced through a management system that rewarded students for appropriate choices and provided a continuum of consequences for mistakes or negative choices. The second tier supported students who were at-risk for problematic behaviors. These students typically benefited from some form of direct intervention. To best support teachers and at-risk students, a team comprised of a building administrator and other behavioral expertise staff, such as a school psychologist, social worker, and special educator, identified tier 2 supports for the most emotional and behaviorally challenged general education students (Mitchell, Bruhn, & Lewis 2016). The SAT process implemented academic and behavioral plans.

In special education, Tier 3 students involved highly individualized social and emotional intervention programs that included functional behavioral assessments, family participation, and community collaboration, especially if a student was working with outside providers. Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBA) and wrap-around supports and services and consultation with outside providers were also utilized in Tier 3, while only in Tier 2, if deemed appropriate. Students who received an FBA generally had complex histories encompassing problematic behaviors coupled with multiple risk factors (i.e., transiency, poor parenting, academic failure).

Through an IEP or SAT process, individual support plans, guided by the FBA, enabled staff to support socially and emotionally challenged students at-risk in schools. These plans taught the replacement behavior and provided environmental modifications to reinforce the replacement skill. “Research on social skill instructional groups has shown decreases in
disruptive behaviors, increases on-task behavior, improved scores form teacher ratings on social behavior and academic competence, along with increases in prosocial play skills, peer interactions, and communication” (Mitchell et al., 2016, p. 548). The data from the FBA contributed to the formation of intervention groups based on students’ problem behaviors. Some teachers viewed collecting data and teaching at the same time as overwhelming tasks (Mitchell et al., 2016). Students who received tier 2 and tier 3 social and emotional interventions early on in their school careers demonstrated noticeable improvements in this area that were sustained over time.

Evaluations of PBIS efforts in schools showed that the framework was sustained over time and led to not only improved social behavior but academic gains for some students (Horner et al., 2009). The use of PBIS had been shown to reduce main office discipline referrals and was sustainable if the process included the adoption of valid PBIS intervention practices. (Muscott et al., 2008). Weiss (2013) found that students at-risk for academics often required direct instruction on learning-related behaviors. Tasks, such as following directions, persevering through a challenging assignment, and working independently, were several actions that low achievement readers were more likely to be associated with than their typical peers.

Schools implementing an SWPBS required educated staff members to be responsible for all students (Sugai & Horner, 2009). Leaders had to eliminate old practices that were not effective and provided a professional development format that allowed for ongoing dialogue around issues pertaining to the implementation and student social development. This type of PBIS effort had been implemented throughout the school into each classroom. Stoiber and Gettinger (2016) described the challenges associated with implementing social and emotional supports because educators and other professionals were reluctant to utilize best practices to
address a student’s social and emotional needs. Due to a lack of knowledge or complexity of the student’s supportive procedures, teachers were resistant to practices, such as progress monitoring or behavioral interventions (Stoiber & Gettinger, 2016).

**Changes and Challenges of RTI Implementation**

The following section examines the changes and challenges of RTI implementation. Specific barriers are described that educators have to navigate when engaging RTI implementation, specifically changes to structures and roles for Tier 1 and special education’s challenges to implementation, also the challenges to the implementation of universal screening and progress monitoring. Educator’s perceptions of RTI and collaboration among professionals have an effect that creates conflicts within isolationistic cultures; therefore, a discussion on professional learning communities (PLCs) is also important.

In adopting a move toward an integrated RTI framework, professionals in schools had to be aware of the challenges and anticipated some of the changes that took place. Leadership, collaboration, and changes to roles and increased responsibilities remained within areas that may be impacted due to RTI implementation. Principals had to lead the school through the implementation process. Staff perceptions of RTI implementation engaged in more collegial conversations around student data and data-based decision making where resources were allocated to meet all students’ needs. Table 2 notes some of the possible changes across staff members due to RTI implementation (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012, p. 493).
The following section describes some of the structural and role changes in Tier 1 that arise within an RTI framework. Then, special education’s challenges to RTI implementation, such as the changes to special education processes and access to special education staff RTI.

Assessments play an essential role in an RTI framework such that employing a universal screener and requiring progress-monitoring data also presents unique challenges to school implementation of universal screening and progress monitoring. Then, the educator’s perceptions of RTI implementation is described. Last, professional learning communities describe the need for team focus in RTI and the increased need for staff collaboration in schools to implement it.

**Changes to Structures and Roles in Tier 1**

As a requirement during the implementation of an RTI framework at the Tier 1 level, the school made changes to traditional structures and roles. Mellard and Johnson (2008) explained that the “alignment of the general education classroom to meet the definition and features of the

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**Table 2**

*Changes in Role Function as Result of RTI Implementation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal</th>
<th>Literacy Coach</th>
<th>Reading Specialist</th>
<th>Special Education</th>
<th>Classroom teacher</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased emphasis on empowering others</td>
<td>Greater emphasis on management and coordination</td>
<td>More focused on frequently targeted interventions for selected students</td>
<td>Teaching students other than “my kids” in special education</td>
<td>Data-based decision making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active involvement with RTI implementation</td>
<td>Increased focus on evidence-based instruction and interventions</td>
<td>Increased informal support to teachers</td>
<td>More involvement with the core literacy program</td>
<td>Expanded “ownership” of students beyond those in the homeroom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishing conditions for successful implementation</td>
<td>A team approach to coaching and changing schoolwide instruction</td>
<td>Working more collaboratively with teachers</td>
<td>Working more collaboratively with teachers</td>
<td>Working more collaboratively with teachers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tier 1 instruction would require significant changes to both school structures and individual’s roles” (p. 71). Two significant changes were the use of universal screening and progress monitoring tools. Through the use of universal screenings and progress monitoring, schools aligned structures that correlate to effective school practices, such as professional learning communities and cohesive instructional program (Burns, & Gibbons, 2012; Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011). The curriculum, instruction, assessment, and interventions were horizontally and vertically aligned across the school. Another change was the level of collaboration expected of all parties (Greenfield et al., 2010). Staff in both regular education and special education or support staff worked collaboratively to address students’ learning needs proactively (Greenfield et al., 2010; Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011; Hoover & Love, 2011). Another shift in tradition roles was for the classroom teacher, who provided the general curriculum, took a more active role in screening students, and provided interventions for some students (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Mellard & Johnson, 2008).

**Special Education Challenges to RTI implementation**

Due to both NCLB and the IDEA reauthorization, students receiving special education were required to meet the high expectation of standards-based reform and continued to access the general curriculum. Staff developed educational programs instruction that focused on special education student’s needs while finding opportunities for involvement in the general education curriculum. In the reauthorization of IDEA, data-based decision making was an essential component of the special education eligibility process (Hoover & Love, 2011; Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Students received effective instruction and interventions in the other tiers of instruction in order to be considered and eligible for special education (Burns & Gibbons, 2012). If a student had effective instruction and interventions at each junction in his or her education, a
team of educators and parents determined the student had a learning disability and qualified for special education services.

Another challenge for special education staff was the incorporation of curriculum-based measurement (CBM) to progress monitor students (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). The use of CBMs to address special education student’s needs and instruction was challenging and difficult to implement, because staff required new materials and training to utilize on a daily basis effectively (Greenfield et al., 2010).

The role of the special education teacher changed under RTI (Cummings et al., 2008; Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011). Prior to RTI, Hoover and Patton (2008) found that some special education teachers do not spend a lot of time working directly with students, because other demands such as testing and meetings took up too much of their time. Some special education teachers also felt a sense of ambiguity around their role because their purpose for working with students may not have been clearly defined (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Staff perceived them as tutors rather than teachers working with special education students.

In the past, service providers, such as speech pathologists and occupational therapists, usually only provided direct services to special education students who qualified for service and had an Individual Education Plan (IEP) that specified a goal and benchmarks designating their expertise as an area of need. Sailor (2009) explained that "RTI implies integrated related service delivery so that specialized professional resource personnel can have a maximal impact on as many students as possible" (p. 256). Under an RTI framework, these special education therapists shifted their time and resources to work with students beyond the special education caseload so that they were inclusive of supporting students at-risk, who may not be identified, but need some remediation.
Implementation Challenges for Universal Screening

When implementing academic and behavioral screening processes, schools addressed several challenges (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). In the administrative area, staff had to be scheduled for screening students, while minimizing interruptions to instruction and learning (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011). Additionally, the record-keeping of vast amounts of data had to be managed and accessible in a timely fashion, because it determined if a student or group of students were at-risk for learning gaps. The information also helped administrators guide the allocation of resources to address student and classroom needs (Sailor, 2009). Staff also had to be able to interpret the results so that curriculum and instructional decisions could be made to best support all learners in their classroom. It was important to not overemphasize the screening results (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011). The results were used in conjunction with other data points, such as daily teacher observations of the student’s performance, other internal data, and teacher recommendations. The screening alone was not directing instruction and decisions but was used more comprehensively with the other mentioned data points.

Under the RTI frameworks, the universal screening took place for all students three times a year (Hoover & Love, 2011). The screening determined students’ proficiency in a particular area. The student data was organized in a manner to allow analysis across a cohort of students and for individual-level discussions (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Leadership within the school used the comparisons of group student performances to identify classrooms in need of additional support. When choosing a screening tool, it was important to consider how the tool aligned with the school district’s requirements in curriculum and standards.

When implementing an RTI framework, closer collaboration among general education, administration, and the specialist staff was necessary (Cummings et al., 2008; Grimaldi &
While coordinating the screening process, administrators had to establish schedules that allowed all students to take the screening with flexibility for any make-ups needed due to absences (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). They also had to provide time to score and analyze the results. If a school system had not already implemented a data system, administrators had to develop or find the resources to develop and maintain a student database.

A literacy team comprised of general education and special education teachers, reading teachers, district staff, or curriculum directors, and principal met three times a year for literacy sessions that coincide with the end of each screening process (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011). Their conversations focused on determining if students are making adequate processes and make decisions around student at-risk who need more support in another tier. By incorporating a screening three times a year into the school, staff underwent some changes and had to adjust new structures (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). General education teachers administered the screening tool to students, as scheduled by the administrator. Administrators, special education staff, and other support staff, such as reading teachers and classroom teachers, also had to assess, chart, and evaluate the results to identify students for further progress monitoring. Classroom teachers provided information about the screening results to parents as long as the results were part of reporting student progress. The specialists and support staff assisted the general education teachers in administering the screening and helped to guide implementation, as necessary. They collaborated with the classroom teacher to determine students that required further assessment and interventions (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011).

Principals and curriculum coaches led the effort to implement a screening measure in the school (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). They provided the necessary infrastructure, such as
technology, materials, and resources to successfully incorporate the screening tool into the school system (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). Administrators offered ongoing professional development opportunities on the screening tool that ensured fidelity to its implementation. Administrators, with classroom teachers and support staff, gathered the feedback to determine if a classroom or a particular group of students warranted interventions and progress monitoring. Principals, along with identified staff such as the reading teacher, reviewed the data not only with the classroom teachers but also with district personnel to ensure fidelity in making decisions around students’ needs (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012).

**Challenges of Implementing Progress Monitoring**

When implementing progress monitoring at the school level, educators had to be aware of the changes that resulted (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). A data-management system had to be established and maintained in order to facilitate communication about student performance within the building. By making this information more accessible to staff, teachers utilized a data management system in conversations with parents, as well as within their ongoing internal conversations focused on student performance.

One challenge noted was the staff’s ability to analyze student performance data with progress monitoring (Greenfield et al., 2010; Stuart et al., 2011). They had to compare these ongoing results with other measures in the district, such as the universal screening, other district assessments, and state testing (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011). Teachers required initial training on the individual progress monitoring assessments and learned how to record the information for the data-management system. Best practice recommended at least biweekly progress monitoring for those identified at-risk, who were in Tier 2 and students who just exited Tier 2 inventions. Discussions among teachers, administrators, and other pertinent staff determined the necessary
cut points for tiered instruction and interventions. These discussions guided how the data-informed instruction choices in the classrooms, as well as necessary student groups, due to learning gaps.

Additionally, incorporating progress monitoring presented implementation challenges (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). Schools had to select the appropriate tools for progress monitoring that aligned with the curriculum and student benchmarks at each grade level (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011). If appropriate, some tools were used in multiple grades. CBM and other progress monitoring tools were mostly focused on monitoring early reading, math, and writing skills (Denton, 2012; Mellard & Johnson, 2008). For older students, there were no published programs for secondary grades (6 – 12 grades). For many teachers, the implementation of progress monitoring across all tiers of instruction presented a significant paradigm shift. Teachers, especially within the general education classroom, made a shift toward more collaboration with other specialists, special educations staff, and administrators (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011; Mellard & Johnson, 2008; Sailor, 2009). Progress monitoring closely aligned with the concepts of effective school practice, such as data-based decisions and professional learning communities (Burns & Gibbons, 2012; Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011).

**Educator’s Perceptions of RTI Implementation**

When implementing an RTI framework, professionals faced many challenges. First, educators in a school moved toward a culture where all students had to be successful socially and academically (Gibbons & Coulter, 2016; Reddy, Dudek, & Shernoff, 2016). Second, principals transitioned from managers to instructional leaders by using and modeling the use of data (Gibbons & Coulter, 2016). Third, a focus on teams, routines, problem-solving processes, technology support, and tech assistance became necessary as universal screening, progress
monitoring, and data systems were put into place and practice (Gibbons & Coulter, 2016). Professionals began the process of finding time for team meetings, data collection and analysis by teachers, documenting instructional planning, and developing a standard problem-solving process to address student needs (Dudek, & Shernoff, 2016). Educators had to be knowledgeable and competent at collecting and interpreting student data. They identified and incorporated instructional practices that were effective teaching strategies and differentiated instruction to meet the varying range of students’ needs. Teachers matched instruction to student needs. Staff analyzed data to select and implement interventions that targeted learning gaps.

A weak link in the process of RTI implementation was the availability of feedback that was routine and reoccurring through the implementation to sustainability. In a study, classroom teachers’ concerns ranged from the pace of implementation to the various components of data collection and lack of guidance, vision, and leadership (Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015). From a different study, the pace and new expectations created an overwhelming experience at initial implementation (White et al., 2012). Based upon feedback from several studies, the amount of testing and data collection was a contributing factor in teachers’ frustration and overwhelming feelings (Greenfield et al., 2010; Shepard & Salembier, 2010).

A barrier often cited by educators to RTI implementation efforts was the lack of ongoing professional learning opportunities (Miller & Freeman, 2016; Wilcox & Murakami-Ramalho, 2013). Skill development opportunities were embedded within the job, and coaching and collegial support were provided and nurtured (Joyce & Showers, 1980; Miller & Freeman, 2016). Coaching and ongoing professional conversations helped to identify instructional practices that best-suited students and adjusted to meet the professional needs of staff (Gibbons & Coulter, 2016). Meyer & Behar-Horenstein (2015) found that elementary teachers’ perceptions of
frustration related to their capacity to learn and adapt when using technology and data-based
decision making. Teachers felt the lack of time, and continuous training negatively affected their
ability to make instructional adjustments and determine the best manner to meet students’ needs
(Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Wilcox & Murakami-Ramlho, 2013). When collaborative
and coaching times were given to teachers, its importance was significant over the three-year
implementation effort (Rinaldi et al., 2011). While teachers felt more confident in measuring and
identifying at-risk students, they desired more training and skill development to match
instruction and interventions to best address the child’s learning gaps (Meyer & Behar-
Horenstein, 2015). Teachers cited their enthusiasm for collegial collaboration in the problem-
solving process, but also shared the need and importance for more team skill development
(Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Rinaldi et al., 2011). Teacher buy-in was cited as a factor
that principals needed to monitor and address during initial implementation (Hoover & Love,

Scollins (2016) analyzed teacher’s perceptions of RTI seven years after implementation
at five elementary schools in a middle-class suburban school district consisting of predominately
white students. She interviewed a variety of teachers in the study, from general education
teachers, special education staff to reading specialist, but did not incorporate building or district
administrators. One result based upon teacher feedback focused on the concern around the
blending of special education and general education. A teacher shared that the district did not
necessarily see clearly the special education staff’s caseloads, primarily students on IEPs, and
students the teachers see informally. For example, the speech and language pathologist worked
with more students than her IEP caseload. The special educators wanted to help at-risk students
and general educators working with them but had to prioritize students on IEPs. Staff at the
elementary level shared that professional development on RTI did not continue after initial implementation. Teachers felt more attune to analyzing data for weakness in student profiles and identifying students at-risk for learning gaps. However, staff desired more professional development in the areas of matching intervention to skill deficits and effective instructional practices and resources that address students’ needs. Staff recognized the benefits of implementing RTI to address literacy issues but wanted to broaden the approach to other areas like mathematics. Scollins (2016) also found that teachers’ perceptions around time were a factor. Not enough time was allotted to address the curriculum needs to differentiate core instruction and provide appropriate interventions for at-risk students. Staff wanted one teacher to be responsible for determining interventions and finding necessary resources for teachers to use in Tier 1 and Tier 2; a position of this type was discontinued due to budget constraints. Teachers also wanted more time with students to provide the necessary Tier 2 interventions. For staff who work in multiple buildings, such as school psychologists or speech pathologists, they faced the challenge that each school implemented RTI differently. Some staff desired a more consistent approach and blueprinted for the district.

Implementing, developing, and sustaining an RTI system required substantial professional development and learning (Miller & Freeman, 2016). Ideally, professional learning preceded implementation and adjusted at stages by addressing feedback and anticipating concerns from staff (Gibbons & Coulter, 2016; Miller & Freeman, 2016). Due to these factors, professional learning communities and curriculum development and alignment, and professional development were important to implement the RTI model successfully.
Professional Learning Communities

An RTI framework should support enhancing professional practices, such as professional learning communities inside the school, but especially the instructional practice that affects student learning (Reddy et al., 2016). Professional learning communities (PLCs) were designated times during the school day for teachers to work together and to “engage in continual dialogue to examine their practice and student performance and to develop and implement more effective instructional practices” (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009, p. 49). Through teamwork, the burden of leadership was shared across the school to address student needs and built the capacity of these teams to make decisions, improve their instruction, and address student needs (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006). The PLCs influenced problem-solving teams, grade-level teams, and a host of other functionary teams within a school and district (Jimerson, Burns, & Van DerHeyden, 2016). With school organizations becoming flatter (e.g., elimination of curriculum teams and other central leadership positions), it was important for the organization to utilize its greatest resource—the teachers. School teams continued to be essential to the RTI framework (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016). Effective teams were able to distribute the work of supporting students and each other. Teachers, whether in leadership positions, such as a reading specialist, or a classroom teacher, made significant contributions to instruction and student learning. Educators had long sought to provide professionals opportunities to focus on improving the practice of teaching and professional learning (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Dufour et al., 2006; Reeves, 2009). The goals of learning communities were to make data accessible to stakeholders, utilize it to inform and change practices, and empower decision-making that improved student outcomes and learning (DuFour et al., 2006; Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011). Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates explained how “Collecting data is only the first step toward
Wisdom. Sharing data is the first step toward community” (as cited by DuFour & DuFour, 2007, p. 8). As a result, professional learning communities engaged in conversations shaped on student performance (DuFour et al., 2006; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006).

Professional learning communities were the structures and supports that allowed educators to engage in shared practices, instructional adjustments, and student progress (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011). Yet, leadership was key in “establishing and maintaining a professional, supportive climate that encouraged team members to use their common planning time to meet the academic and relationship needs of the students on the team” (Cook & Faulkner, 2009, p.8), as determined in a study on establishing common planning time and professional, collaborative practices. McLaughlin and Talbot (2001) expressed similar findings from their study with high school principals, where they described how principals were the leaders in developing and allocating resources to enact this change. Principals had to see that common planning time was a key component to the schedule that ensured collaborative culture to permeate systemically throughout the school (Mertens, Flowers, Anfara, & Caskey, 2010).

Ongoing conversations among professionals about student learning and instruction continued to be the key element to address collective knowledge gaps (Hargreaves, 2003; Schmoker, 2006). Professional development through workshops was not enough (Schmoker, 2006). Educators, teachers, and administrators had to prioritize their time together to ensure that bus schedules were not directing their professional focus. Hargreaves (2003) found that student performance improved when teachers engaged in professional learning communities. Through a collaborative structure, the professional learning communities of teachers focused on different student performance measures and discussed their instructional practice based upon how students’ progress (Hargreaves, 2003; Stuart et al., 2011). Roland Barth, Linda Darling-
Hammond, Richard Elmore, and other well-known scholarly practitioners described structured teacher collaboration as a means to address both the increasing needs of students and the teachers’ desire to be continuous learners (Barth, 1990; Elmore, 1996; Schmoker, 2006). To engage in the new process, staff had to share and work together as a community of learners (Barth, 1990). According to Weick (1982), professional learning communities, embedded into schools’ cultures and schedules, were the means to begin to “tightly couple” (p. 674) schools, and student success.

Elementary schedules rarely provided, if at all, opportunities for professional colleagues to meet regularly together during the school day (Johnson et al., 2004). Weick (1982) found that schools were tightly coupled to things that directly impacted the daily schedule, such as busing and teacher contracts, but had not clearly defined student success, such as reading milestones.

To establish professional learning communities in elementary schools, a master schedule prioritized collaborative planning periods with their professional learning team, so they had the time each week to meet. Teachers had to analyze student learning, as measured by best practice (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011). Universal screenings, research-based methods, teacher observations, and common assessments were the data points that teachers used to determine how students were progressing (Mesmer & Mesmer, 2008). In a professional learning community, teachers used this information to make informed decisions on how best to meet the needs of students based upon what the students’ learning shows (Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011). Stoll et al. (2006) described how teachers engaged in ongoing instructional dialogues had adjusted to the students’ progress or lack thereof. Principals fostered a safe space for feedback back loops from the teacher leaders who were invested in pushing colleagues forward into this new way of thinking and structure (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Burns & Gibbons, 2012). As a team, teachers...
and administrators were more effective through a collaborative culture, which eliminated
tendencies toward isolation (DuFour et al., 2006; Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011; Swanson et al.,
2012).

Peterson, McCarthey, and Elmore (1996) examined schools that restructured their days to
ensure structured times for collaboration. Their results found that the teaching profession was
grounded in daily practice. Therefore, they recommended frequent internal conversations be
scheduled during the school day to address both student learning and professional support
(Peterson et al., 1996). The professional community defined what a tight schedule, and a loose
one is, but the purpose remained focused on student learning and collaborative culture (DuFour
& DuFour, 2007; Weick, 1982).

Teachers who participated in collaborative efforts were often more satisfied and
committed to their work (Elmore, 1996). Elmore (1996) found that collegial interactions and
professional opportunities in schools were not likely to affect the improvement of teacher
performance and practice unless it was connected to a set of goals that guided learning and
collegiality. Cook and Mertens (2009) found that common planning time for teachers played a
significant role in fostering a positive working culture, reporting higher levels of job satisfaction,
and improving student learning. Additionally, administrators defined the various purposes of the
meetings as a professional learning community or other for members to know the expectations
clearly for the team’s meetings. To make the time in the schedule for these meetings,
administrators and teacher leaders had to prioritize the common planning time and foster
professional learning communities into school schedules (Mertens et al., 2010). Similarly,
Hord’s (1997) research found that professional learning communities lessened teacher isolation
and enlisted a collective decision-making model. Learning communities fostered a shared
responsibility of all students and a host of other professional benefits to staff (Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006). The benefits of common planning time and enacting professional learning communities were transferable into an elementary schedule.

Organizational and Educational Change Theory

Both Schein (2010) and Fullan (2007) state school cultures and leadership play a role in change efforts. Within this section, both organizational and educational theory literature provides the underpinnings of school environments and culture that are affected by the implementation of change efforts, such as RTI. To begin, the section examines Fullan’s interactive factors affecting implementation and other theories. After Fullan, the section explores theorists Burke and Litwin’s model of organizational performance and change (Burke, 2008).

Fullan’s Interactive Factors Affecting Implementation

Fullan (2007b) found that there were several factors affecting the implementation of any change. He described educational change as a dynamic process that involved interacting variables. His model incorporated interacting variables that he grouped into three broad categories: characteristics of change, local characteristics and external factors. Fullan (2007) also noted four characteristics of change. First, the school had to face a significant need for change. The complexity and clarity of the change were two other factors in the change process. Local characteristics and external factors also affected the change efforts. Fullan (2007b) described local characteristics as the school district, community, principal, and teacher. Other local factors included various community groups, such as a school committee or school councils. External factors such as state and federal educational agencies influenced the change. For example, federal laws regulating special education directly impacted the RTI framework in schools. These interdependent variables that Fullan described impacted any RTI framework implementation and
was considered key factors within this qualitative case study. Many of the stakeholders identified by Fullan were active actors in the change process. Figure 4 below is adapted from Fullan (2007b).

Fullan (2002) described how leaders had to change the culture of a school to bring about any type of educational or organizational change. Schein (2010) found that subcultures were common within organizations. Fullan and Hargreaves (1992) stated that schools develop these “balkanized” (p.71) competing cultures that formed from loyalties and identities. These subcultures within a school reinforced group norms and impacted interactions among colleagues that affected curriculum, learning, teaching, and adult relationships (Bush, 2011). As a result of different cultures within a school, the core mission and goals for change were often interpreted differently across the subcultures. These varying interpretations resulted in a fragmented mission and goals that created a disconnect between the original intentions of the mission and the staff (Schein, 2010).

Figure 4. Interactive factors affecting change. Adapted from Fullan (2007).
Within Fullan’s (2007) education change model, schools moved through three stages of learning: initiation, implementation, and continuation/institutionalization. Fullan’s model aligned with Schein’s Stages of Learning/Change. In the earliest stage of initiation, leaders developed motivation for change through raising a moral purpose. For example, a leader described why the change had to take place because state examinations were below the necessary benchmarks.

Fullan (2010; 2007) found that leaders had to balance the pace and urgency of change with positive pressures. These positive pressures motivated staff through their relationships with peers. Leaders also created non-punitive accountability where staffs were accountable to each other, without negative connotations or reprimand conditions. By fostering safe spaces for teachers, leaders provided open channels of communication to meet the goals and maintain relationships. Leaders made student data and learning goals transparent to all members, which created internal accountability. This transparency influenced ongoing results and practices that caused the results (Fullan, 2010).

Education reform changed the cultures of classrooms and schools. This sociopolitical process developed a moral purpose and built the capacity of staff to institutionalize the change effort. Through new knowledge and partnerships, solutions had to be found together to develop shared meaning and understanding between the individual and collective staff members. A restructuring and reculturing of the organization were necessary to bring about change (Fullan, 1998). As a school proceeded through the educational change process, teachers and principals navigated the many challenges that they faced, such as being overwhelmed with problems and fragmentation of efforts (Newmann et al., 2001). Schools had to provide coherence and deep meaning to the change effort. Leaders developed an infrastructure and processes that engaged teachers in developing new knowledge and understanding while providing opportunities for
teachers to gain a deeper understanding of the new approaches (Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2007b). Teachers had to create and share new knowledge. The process of reculturing took place daily through the organization’s work, where the old culture was replaced by the new.

**Burke-Litwin Model of Organizational Performance and Change**

Burke (2008) described the Burke-Litwin model of organizational performance and change as an open system, where feedback loops inside and outside the organization generated change through outside forces that impacted the internal aspects of the organization. Burke-Litwin model identified similar influences in the change process, resembling Fullan’s interactive factors of change. The mission, the external environment, leadership, and culture were transformative factors that supported the change efforts. Within the Burke-Litwin model, the transformative and transactional factors were impacted by inner and outer contexts (Burke, 2008). Burke (2008) found that leadership was central to transforming the organization and developing new behaviors of its members. The transactional factors, such as structures and policies, related to the day-to-day operations of the organization.

The management aspects of change were also important. Managers as leaders shaped their role to improve the organization and others while balancing the numerous needs of the organization internally and externally. In this model, Burke (2008) asserted that the external environment directly had the greatest influence to impact organizational change. The transformative factors had the most impact on the organization. When examining the change of RTI in a school, the variables of the Burke-Litwin model of organizational performance and change guided examination of the different aspects of the organization’s change efforts. For example, federal law mandated schools to change; therefore, the law was an external influence
requiring aspects of the organization to act and perform differently. Figure 5 presents the Burke-Litwin Model of Organizational Performance and Change (Burke, 2008).

![Burke-Litwin Model of Organizational Performance and Change](image)

Figure 5. Burke-Litwin Model of Organizational Performance and Change from Burke (2008). Arrows note feedback loops and labeled boxes are factors influencing change.

**Change Literature**

By implementing RTI, schools changed processes because of the directive from management to comply with the federal law. Weick and Quinn (1999) stated that some change might feel episodic in nature because it is “less complete, slower, more deliberate and formal than emergent change, more disruptive because programs are replaced rather than altered, and initiated at higher levels in the organization” (p. 368). Additionally, Chin and Benne (1999) discussed several levels for change to be initiated. When instituting a change in schools, the change problem shifted to human problems: resistance, anxiety, conflicts, disrupted interpersonal communication, and so forth. Power, normative-re-educative, and empirical strategies were
employed to implement change (Chin & Benne, 1989; Szabla, 2007). An example of power was when leadership dictated through a top-down approach that change was going to happen in a specific manner and timeline. Normative-re-educative caused actions and practices that altered old patterns and developed new ones. As a result of these strategies, teachers changed in attitude, values, skills, and relationships, all juxtaposed new knowledge and skills.

The empirical strategy focused on communication and the message of change and implementation. The strategy spread new knowledge and reasons throughout the organization in schools and to parents. These strategies described the complexity of change taking place within the school organization (Szabla, 2007). While schools were incredibly resistant to comprehensive changes (Datnow, 2005; Datnow & Springfield, 2000; Huberman & Miles, 1984; Vernez et al., 2006), Szabla (2007) suggested that empirical and normative-re-educative generated positive correlation to change, while more power-coercive efforts negatively affected individual’s perceptions of the planned organizational change.

Ambivalence to change generated a strong cognitive response, but also one that was coupled with a negative emotional response (Piderit, 2000). In order to let go and move toward change, individuals had to feel a sense of uncertainty. Goodson, Moore, & Hargreaves (2005) described how teachers were nostalgic for the past when changes were undertaken. Depending on their years of service, teachers experienced change differently. Experienced teachers felt alienated from the school. Professionally, they questioned their professional skills and judgments and were less effective with students. Experienced teachers were often resistant to the mandate, while newer teachers were more open.

Hall and Hord (1987) suggested that principals had made a positive difference, in spite of resistance from teachers. However, they found that principals could not proceed alone. Principals
facilitated the change by enlisting others in defining and adapting the change effort. These “other” individuals who helped assist in the change effort were assistant principals, curriculum coordinators, grade level teachers, district administration, and teachers in the school. To help the effort, facilitators had to consider the point of view of the people undergoing the change process, in addition to anticipating teacher’s questions and concerns.

School Cultures

The complexity of school cultures and the dynamic factors presented within schools provided unique challenges for educators, parents, and communities (Fullan, 2007). Elmore (2000) and Fullan (2002) found the most significant challenge was to establish schools as places that continuously learn and improve while overcoming barriers and obstacles. From their seminal study on teachers’ learning, Elmore and Burney (1997) found that educators had to learn in the context of their daily work. Fullan’s research and studies (1995; 1996; 2002a; 2002b; 2002c; 2002d; 2007) on teacher learning and improvement also supported teachers learning in the context and setting where they work. Elmore and Burney (1997) explained that the “process of changing practice has to originate with teachers, students, administrators, and parents working out difficult problems together in a web of shared expectations” (p. 11). Reid (1987) described how the change had to be understood within the institutional context and culture of the school.

Leaders managed the day-to-day operations of the change, as well as assisted staff moving forward with the changes. In examining school cultures and educational change, Hallinger (2003) explained that “effective leadership requires both transactional and transformative elements” (p. 338). In transformational change, Burke (2008) and Fullan (2007) found that leadership was central to moving the organization forward toward the intended vision. By utilizing outside forces, such as pressure from parent organizations and external mandates, an
administrator used these factors to change the mission and vision of the organization or roles and responsibilities of individuals within the organization.

Historically teachers worked in isolation, choosing what and how they teach with little feedback from supervisors and colleagues (Cohn, 2009; DuFour et al., 2006; Elmore, 2000). Within this isolated culture, schools found pockets of teaching excellence and at other times, mediocrity. Through RTI’s systems approach, the new framework directly challenged the isolationistic cultures, because RTI focused on collaborative teams to meet the needs of all students.

To counteract isolationistic habits and tendencies in schools, school leadership established common planning and meetings that promoted teachers working together in teams (Elmore & Burney, 1997). The prioritization of this time was extremely difficult at the elementary level because elementary teachers only had one preparation period per day. School leaders had to balance meeting times with ensuring that teachers had the necessary preparation minutes, as noted in the teacher’s contract. By providing opportunities to work as a team, staff concerns and problems were addressed; clear expectations about the implementation of changes, such as RTI, should be developed and discussed. Cohn (2009) and DuFour et al. (2006) recommend that these collaborative teams had an administrative presence. The structured meetings focused on student achievement and progress monitoring, analysis of student performance, and curriculum and instruction decisions.

Leadership

Even though there had been periods of frustration and confusion with implementation (Parsons & Fidler, 2005), Hallinger (2003) emphasized the importance of principals as instructional leaders and managers who enabled teachers to commit, enact, and perform.
Principals played a central role in communicating RTI implementation to various stakeholders, including the parent community, school boards, and central office staff (Shepherd & Salembier, 2010). Reeves (2009) emphasized the importance of leaders building the capacity of the organization through effective networks inside and outside the school. As noted in several studies, teachers, whether in leadership positions such as a reading specialist or simply a classroom teacher, made significant contributions to instruction (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Elmore & Burney, 1997). Since collegiality and professionalism were positive factors in the system, schools built on the capacity of the organization from within its own resources and professional networks. From one study on RTI implementation, teachers were put into positions to discuss student learning and the curriculum to form curriculum and grade-level teams (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). The principal controlled schedules, as it maximized students' learning opportunities, service delivery, and allowed for collaboration of staff (Shepherd & Salembier, 2010).

Due to the numerous initiatives, school systems remained challenged by policy incoherence (Fullan, 2007b). “School leaders face the challenge of complying with numerous initiatives at the federal, state, and local levels” (Mellard & Johnson, 2008, p. 12). Often, policies were interpreted with their own meaning and were not necessarily related to each other (Newmann et al., 2001). This incoherence among policies created a fragmented approach to educational programming and student learning (Fullan, 2007b). As a school system began to think about RTI implementation, school leaders played an”active role in creating, communicating, and defending both the principles and the plan of the system” (Cohn, 2009, p. 23). When schools organized and integrated these policies within the school’s mission, a level of coherence was achieved between policy institutions and schools.
As leaders moved ahead with the change, they had to take charge and move the organization through the change process, while anticipating challenges. Bush (2011) explained that “leaders have the main responsibility for generating and sustaining culture and communicating core values and beliefs, both within the organization and to external stakeholders” (p. 182). Cultural changes remained the most difficult and problematic for organizations (Bush, 2011; Fullan 2007b). Bush (2011) found that most people’s beliefs, attitudes, and values were far more resistant to change than leaders had anticipated.

Prior to undertaking significant changes, a school had to determine what it stands for and what it hopes to achieve (Sailor, 2009). An RTI framework supported a school’s mission statement because most schools focused on student learning, good instruction, and the social development of their students (Mellard & Johnson, 2008). The RTI framework integrated instruction, assessment, and interventions in a school-wide approach to improve social and academic outcomes for all students.

According to Shepard and Salemhier (2010), the implications for those in leadership positions, especially principals, were that the leaders had to ensure that change was connected to the mission of the school system and profession of collegiality. Leaders had to help staff make sense of this change in the school community. Leaders also navigated any emotional backlash through collaborative conversations focused on improving student learning (Elmore, 2005; DuFour et al., 2006). With the inclusion of participatory conversations and input from teachers and parents, principals had to engage with the staff to determine how the external mandate of RTI should be navigated to focus on student learning and reading development outcomes (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Burns & Gibbons, 2012).
Sustaining change is incredibly difficult, as Reeves et al. (2009) suggested. Leadership and networks had to continue to cultivate the change into the organization’s culture. Spillane (2009) reinforced this notion by stating that leaders, when successful in leading an organizational change initiative, had to manage and nurture it; otherwise, it will be another lost initiative. Burke (2008) found that leaders had to be able to maintain a clear vision and mission, but realized that implementation of the change would be completed in overlapping phases. Leaders also had to realize that they would not be able to micromanage the process nor anticipate all the roadblocks along the way. Elmore (1996) concluded that the organization had to promote and reinforce these behaviors. Within this structural change, principals had to empower teachers (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Shepard & Salemhier, 2010). Professional learning communities engaged with educators to share common values and vision for students, as reflected in their own practices to take collective responsibility for all students, while collaborating on learning as a group and individually (Stoll et al., 2006). Leadership created and manages this culture.

Principals had to take the lead of an RTI implementation effort (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012; Kozleski & Huber, 2010). As leaders, they had to grasp a strong understanding of RTI principles. Next, principals engaged in focused conversations around the policy and implementation into their buildings with district leaders and school staff. School leaders had to be aware that teachers may not have the skills to provide the necessary reading instruction or classroom management skills to teach at-risk students (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). Allingham (2011) found that almost three-quarters of primary teachers may not feel they can teach at-risk students, nor do they feel responsible for them. Some kindergarten teachers believed that this work was developmentally inappropriate. Once a plan was developed, principals "lead the instructional and cultural changes that are required to install and sustain RTI models" (Kozleski & Huber, 2010, p. 262).
Summary

After extensive research and study on RTI, Fuchs et al. (2003) suggested that reliable and consistent implementation of RTI in schools remained elusive. Hollenbeck and Patrikakou (2014) described how more research had to be done on how RTI impacted professional practices, such as instruction, assessments, roles and responsibilities, and new tasks, attitudes, and behaviors in schools. Hollenbeck and Patrikakou (2014) also suggested that investigation and more study into the professional beliefs and attitudes on the reform effort was necessary due to the limited research in this area. Greenfield et al., (2010) and Wixson (2011) found that the literature on RTI required more research on RTI models that incorporated the many components of RTI and how professional collaborative teams in schools supported all students. Individual studies of RTI analyzed specific components or only a particular professional’s perspective, such as the general education teacher or special education teacher (Hughes & Dexter, 2011). While there were several studies of RTI at the primary level and different aspects of reading development in an elementary school, the literature neglected the educator’s perception on RTI beyond initial implementation (Gibbons & Coulter, 2016; Miller & Freeman, 2016; Scollins, 2016; Wixson, 2011) and more scarce on developed integrated models (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016).

By implementing the RTI framework, educators made changes to their practices and interactions, which threatened current practices and conditions in schools (DuFour et al., 2006; Fullan, 2007; Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011; Swanson et al., 2012; Shepard & Salembier, 2010). The cultures in schools impacted change (Burke, 2008; Elmore, 2000; Fullan, 2007; Schein, 2010). More research had to be done to see how RTI works in schools (Ehren, 2013; Greenfield et al., 2010; Van DerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007).
Education reform is felt differently across individuals in school organizations. An urban elementary school in New Mexico offers a unique perspective on the change effort of RTI and its sustainability. The case site is a point in time where the behavior and practices of RTI implementation refreeze or reculture in place. Through the use of Schein’s (1988) Stages of Change/Learning and knowledge in the change literature, it is necessary to gather the educator’s perspectives of an integrated RTI model at an urban elementary school in New Mexico to address gaps in the literature. A qualitative case study is the means to look deeply into the culture changes and gather adult perspectives on this education reform.
CHAPTER THREE: QUALITATIVE METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the impact of the implementation of a multi-tiered RTI system in an urban elementary school in New Mexico. This research provides a more advanced view of RTI implementation. The following research questions reflect these implementation issues:

1. How did an urban elementary school in New Mexico implement an integrated RTI model?
2. How did the implementation of the integrated model of RTI change teaching practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?
3. How did implementation of an integrated RTI framework change leadership practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?

Introduction

The implementation of an integrated RTI framework into an elementary school setting is a complex process where potential errors and problems arise. A qualitative tradition is chosen for this study because the study examines at a deep level how administrators and teachers experience this change process and its impact on teaching practices, leadership, and school culture. This type of in-depth study seeks to answer how a phenomenon affects the natural setting of an urban elementary school (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Stake, 1995). Qualitative tradition entails an inquiry process that is based in a rich methodological tradition that explores social and human problems through participants’ experiences and perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Ponterotto, 2005). The research questions in a qualitative study remain broad and general. Participants construct and share their personal experiences (Creswell, 2009). In the qualitative tradition, researchers play an integral role in building a complex view of the
case in its natural setting (Bassey; 1999; Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). A qualitative study allows for an understanding of the human experience in relation to Response to Intervention (RTI) implementation and flexibility in examining RTI in its natural setting at an urban elementary school in New Mexico. To understand the impact of RTI’s implementation in a school setting, a qualitative approach best meets the needs of this study.

This chapter details the researcher’s approach on how to study the impact of RTI implementation in an urban elementary school in New Mexico and the reviews interpretive paradigm and how knowledge is sought within this paradigm. This chapter also examines the qualitative tradition to explain how it aligns with the study. The first section summarizes the research approach and justification for a qualitative case study on RTI and is followed by the study’s methods and design including sampling, case site, protection of human subjects, recruitment, and access are detailed. Data collection, data storage, data analysis follows the methods section. Next, trustworthiness, validity, reliability, and transferability for this study are also discussed. A summary provides a quick review of why the qualitative case study approach supports the research on RTI implementation.

**Interpretive Research Paradigm**

A research paradigm shapes the study. Within a research paradigm, how knowledge is sought and how the researcher gathers and interprets the reality of participants guides the research approach to gain insight from the study. Ontology refers to the nature and structure of the world; the world is seen in absolutes or subjectively (Antwi & Hmaza, 2015; Crotty, 2010). The interpretive paradigm assumes that the world is made of many realities due to the subjective experience of individuals (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 2010). In the interpretive paradigm, the epistemological assumption for “the process in which the investigator comes to know the truth
“and reality” (Creswell, 2013, p. 218) is to engage in the research with the participants and through this interaction only can the hidden truth be uncovered (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Crotty, 2010). The axiological assumption of the interpretive paradigm is the impact of the researcher’s own biases and knowledge of the phenomenon under study (Ponterotto, 2005). Due to the interactive nature of the researcher with participants, the researcher needs to detect and minimize any researcher bias that arises (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009).

The interpretive paradigm framework for social and empirical analysis came directly from Immanuel Kant (Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Snape & Spencer, 2003). Kant believed that participants each developed their own unique view of the world and could not separate or create an absolute reality. Building on Kant’s ideas, Max Weber explained that understanding the other’s point of view in the context of the world provided an individual with empathetic understanding, known in German as verstehen. Weber viewed it as essential to the interpretive approach (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Snape & Spencer, 2003). Weber emphasized that the interpretive paradigm’s “aim is to understand subjectively meaningful experiences” (Snape & Spencer, 2003, p. 7), while positivism, associated with the quantitative approach, created law-like propositions that explain the objective reality of the world.

The interpretive paradigm incorporates a method that involves the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the data gathered (Crotty, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005). The participant’s own words explain, describe, and understand the phenomenon being studied. A heuristic approach shapes the relationship between researcher and participant, where meaning is hidden, but must be brought out through their interactions (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005). The interaction between participant and researcher supports deeper understanding because this interaction helps uncover the participants’ meaning, which may be hidden or implied (Butin,
Multiple realities exist and may change over time because each participant’s own reality is socially constructed based upon their human experience and their interaction with the world. The person’s reality is “influenced by the context of the situation, namely the individual’s experience of perspectives, the social environment, and the interaction between the researcher and participant” (Ponterotto, 2005, p.130). The interpretive paradigm ensures the participant’s experiences, and their understanding remains central to the study. It also requires that the researcher acknowledge experiences and biases that may affect the interpretive approach.

In the interpretive paradigm, researchers do not seek consensus on themes but build toward general ideas and categories (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 2010; Merriam, 1998; Ponterotto, 2005). Meaning is constructed by drawing inferences or judging the phenomenon within a context or natural setting (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 2010). This natural inquiry connects the interpretive paradigm to the subjective experiences of the participants. Interpretive paradigm believes humans construct a reality that is shaped by an individual’s subjective experiences and interaction with the researcher (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Crotty, 2010; Ponterotto, 2005; Snape & Spencer, 2003). Meaning or understanding of the reality is based upon gathering and collecting information by interviewing and observing.

For this study, the interpretive approach seeks to understand the work in which people live and experience (Bassey, 1999; Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). The interpretive paradigm engages the researcher to consider the experiences of others through an empathetic view. With the interpretive paradigm, the study of social interpretations and relationships within the boundaries of the study constructs knowledge and understanding (Creswell; 2013; Stake, 1995).
Education is a process (Merriam, 1998). The RTI framework remains intimately related to numerous actions and relationships. To understand these actions and relationships, the examination of many contexts, such as historical, political, social, economic, and personal that may be related to the phenomenon. Stake (1995) and Bassey (1999) suggested that these areas are necessary to consider in qualitative research. Key episodes, testimonies, and narratives are some of the data points that provide rich descriptions to gather information for the study.

Interpretation is a significant part of research in qualitative research (Bassey, 1999; Stake, 1995). For the qualitative study, data collection entailed work notes, transcripts of interviews, reports of conversations, and other field notes; numerous researchers recommend a multiple methods approach to gathering data (Crotty, 2010; Bassey, 1999; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). The interpretive design of a study should gain an understanding of the participant’s experiences (Merriam, 1998). To understand RTI through the participants’ understanding and experiences, a qualitative study relies upon theories and concepts but does not test them. One benefit of qualitative research is that others may gain understanding through a clear study of the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998; Qi, 2009). By building a clear understanding of the RTI in this study, others may benefit and be able to improve their practice in their own educational setting.

**Qualitative Tradition**

When preparing a study, it is important to link the research to the philosophical tradition (Antwi & Hamza, 2015). By clarifying the researcher’s thoughts on the phenomenon to research and philosophical tradition, a theoretical framework is matched to the study. Antwi and Hamza (2015) explain that:

The framework for any research includes beliefs about the nature of reality and humanity (ontology), the theory of knowledge that informs the research (epistemology), and how
that knowledge may be gained (methodology) that brought about differences in the type of research methodologies used in social science research (p. 223).

Both quantitative and qualitative traditions embody research methods of “collection, analysis, and interpretation of observations or data” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 125).

Quantitative research explains knowledge as understanding and truths that are universal for all people. Falling under the Positivist reality, the quantitative tradition believes researchers separate the participants from the objective world and their reality (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Crotty, 2010; Snape & Spencer, 2003). In the Positivist reality, “etic refers to universal laws and behaviors that transcend nations and cultures and apply to all humans” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 128). These empirical facts of the world exit separate from human experience, personal ideas, and thoughts; instead, the laws of cause and effect shape the universe. The methods of this tradition typically distance the researcher from the participants. Quantitative researchers believe that understanding comes from testing these universal truths through strict quantifiable measures, usually involving large scale data samples or surveys (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 2010; Snape & Spencer, 2003). Understanding and knowledge are objective and quantifiable (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 2010; Snape & Spencer, 2003). While the quantitative method is rich in history within the social sciences, the philosophy and methods of research do not match the needs of this study. Due to the research questions for the study, an in-depth understanding of the participants’ experience is necessary. Instead, the qualitative tradition best fits the needs of this study.

The qualitative tradition embodies a social inquiry that has roots in hermeneutics, phenomenological and sociological traditions (Ponterotto, 2005). The qualitative tradition is a:
Naturalistic inquiry developed within the social and human sciences and referred to theories on interpretation (hermeneutics) and human experience (phenomenology). They include various strategies for systematic collection, organisation, and interpretation of textual material obtained by talking with people or through observation. The aim of such research is to investigate the meaning of social phenomena as experienced by the people themselves. (Malterud, 2001, p. 398)

Patton (1990) explained that qualitative research should “provide perspective rather than truth, empirical assessment of local decision-makers’ theories of action rather than generation and verification of universal theories” (as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 209). To study RTI’s impact in an elementary school, understanding of the participants’ personal experiences and journey implementing is necessary. For this qualitative study, information from participants about their experiences is gathered to unearth understanding and to examine the phenomenon within the context of its natural setting at an elementary school.

Merriam (1998) describes the key philosophical assumption underlying all qualitative research is that knowledge from individuals is constructed and forged through their own understanding and interaction with the world. “Most contemporary qualitative researchers hold that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered” (Stake, 1995, p. 99). The qualitative tradition focuses on understanding the participant’s perspectives or the emic, often referred to as the insider’s perspective (Flick, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Snape & Spencer, 2003). A participant’s reality or understanding may change over time (Merriam, 1998). Ponterro (2005) explains that qualitative tradition describes and interprets “the experiences of research participants in a context-specific setting” (p. 128). Multiple realities are recognized as individuals develop their own meaning and understanding in the world (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 2010; Merriam, 1998;
Ponterotto, 2005). Due to the recognition of multiple realities, a researcher in a qualitative study does not seek to establish a single truth, prove a theory, or find consensus in their conclusions (Ponterotto, 2005). Since meaning is socially constructed by the individual’s interaction with the world, this qualitative study focuses on how people construct an understanding of their worldview and reality on RTI implementation.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to bring about the participants’ perspective and understanding of RTI beyond the initial years of implementation by examining an elementary school that experienced it firsthand for at least six years. Through this qualitative study, “research is, after all, producing knowledge about the world—in our case, the world of educational practice” (Merriam, 1998, p. 3). Because RTI is an educational process and framework that needs further understanding, the use of participants’ everyday language ensures that it captures their experiences and understanding. Participants’ words are often used to describe and support an understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009). Grounding the study in the participants’ experiences and words also ensure their understanding or emic remains central to this study.

The qualitative tradition is a research approach with several common features (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). Often, a level of understanding is sought around a complex issue, process, or human event (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research focuses on the meaning and understanding of the phenomenon being studied by examining people’s experiences (Flick, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Stake 1998). Purposeful sampling is employed by the researcher to select a sample that provided an information-rich and descriptive study that provides the most learning and information (Merriam, 1998). Data collection entails the use of interviews, observation, and document analysis (Bassey, 1999; Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Stake 1995; Yin,
During data analysis, an inductive research strategy is used to develop and construct findings by comparing across multiple forms of data (Merriam, 1998). While primarily thought as an inductive process, qualitative studies also utilize deductive methods, when appropriate. From the data analysis, comparative pieces of data form categories or themes. These findings are presented in rich, descriptive detail to ensure a holistic picture and understanding of the complexities of the qualitative study. Figure 6 details the general nature and features of a qualitative study utilized in this study.

**Figure 6. General Nature and Features of a Qualitative Study adapted from Merriam (2009) and Creswell (2013)**

In qualitative studies, the researcher examines the complexity of a case or cases through its activities and important circumstances; a holistic view of the study is necessary (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Maxwell (2005) explains that researchers not only sample participants through interviews, but also examine the settings, processes, and events that shape the phenomenon. Data gathering incorporates multiple data sources like interviews, observations,
and document analysis, as recommended by various researchers (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Qi, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). The qualitative tradition explores an understanding of the phenomenon from the participants’ perspectives rather than from the researcher’s point of view (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Qi, 2009; Stake, 1995; Tight, 2010; Yin, 2009). Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest that qualitative researchers focus on depth rather than the wide breadth of quantitative research. Qualitative researchers delve into understanding the “specific situations, individuals, groups, or moments in time that are important or revealing” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 2). In qualitative tradition, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1996; Yin, 2009). Characteristics of qualitative studies are described in Table 3:

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Qualitative Research</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conducted in the natural setting that requires close interaction with participants at the setting of the case site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relies on the researcher as a key instrument in data collection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Involves using multiple methods like analysis of interviews, document, and field notes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Involves complex reasoning going between inductive and deductive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focuses on participants’ perspectives, their meanings, and the researchers’ interpretation of these multiple viewpoints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situated within the context or setting of the participants /sites (social/political/historical)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involves an emergent and evolving design rather than tightly prefigured design</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reflective and interpretative to the researcher’s own biography/social identity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Presents a holistic, complex picture</td>
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Adapted from Creswell (2013) *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*.

Given the nature and characteristics of qualitative research, the study on RTI implementation at an urban elementary school aptly fits within the qualitative field of study. This
study utilizes interpretation because it is emphasized in the qualitative tradition (Bassey, 1999; Creswell, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Qi, 2009; Stake, 1995; Tight, 2010).

The natural setting for this study was an elementary school. As the researcher, I participated in data gathering and be the primary instrument in its collection. As the interpreter of the qualitative research, I observed the workings of the case and recorded objectively events that transpire in the natural setting of a K-5 elementary school. For this study, I explored the phenomenon of RTI from multiple data sources and perspectives to facilitate understanding of the case. In keeping with the interpretive paradigm and qualitative research, the participants’ experiences with RTI implementation remained the foci of this study. In keeping with the interpretive paradigm, I acknowledged my own biases and previous experiences with RTI and the District where the study took place. In the qualitative tradition, induction and deduction were both utilized during data gathering and analysis (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Qi, 2009; Stake, 1995). While gathering data, I also inductively determined the meaning and drew conclusions based upon the observations and other analyzed data to answer the broad research questions in the qualitative study on the phenomenon of implementing an integrated RTI model and how it impacted the school site’s leadership, teaching practices, and school culture. Upon nearing a saturation point during the data collection, deduction reasoning was utilized (Merriam, 1998). Themes and categories were written with rich, thick descriptions of the participants’ words to ensure their experiences remain central to the study and in keeping with the characteristics of the qualitative tradition. In keeping with the tradition, I presented a holistic view of the RTI implementation from the participant’s experiences.

In summary, the qualitative tradition best met the needs of this study. The quantitative tradition established the truth to large numbers, not necessarily depth from one particular case.
“One of the assumptions underlying qualitative research is that reality is holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing; it is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered, observed, and measured as in quantitative research” (Merriam, 1998, p. 202).

A new level of understanding of RTI implementation in a school setting was sought. Based on the qualities and characteristics of the qualitative tradition, a qualitative study was recommended, because this study sought to understand RTI in its natural setting while being an active agent in data gathering. Stake (1995) recommended that “most qualitative researchers not only believe that there are multiple perspectives or views of the case that need to be represented, but that there is no way to establish, beyond contention, the best view” (p. 108). In the qualitative studies, the interpretive paradigm placed an emphasis on empathic understanding; the stories and experiences of the participants remained central, which aligned with this study.

**Research Approach and Justification for a Qualitative Case Study**

Merriam (1998) explains that a case study research is “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (p. xiii). A qualitative case study is bound by location, time, or experiences (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). This study was bound by several factors. Location was one factor, where the K – 5 elementary school setting bound the study. Since RTI implementation was heavily focused on early intervention, an elementary school setting in New Mexico was appropriate to research and the focus for this study. Participants also must have experienced RTI implementation for several years, thus having a shared experience. Since the development and implementation of an integrated RTI framework take several years, time was also a factor, because the case site and participants needed to be working in an integrated RTI model for several years past initial implementation.
Qualitative case study methods are ideal for applied fields of study, such as education, because they present a level of understanding that can affect and improve practice (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). Qualitative case study research investigates complex social units that include multiple points of view and variables that lead to understanding a phenomenon in its natural setting (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Notes, interviews, observations, and school artifacts are the pieces of data that the researcher wanted to use to answer research questions (Creswell, 2009; Creswell, 2013, Flick, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). The use of multiple data points in case studies separates it from other qualitative methodologies and makes this method very useful in this study due to the complex nature of the phenomenon under study.

Case study designs tend toward three variations: intrinsic, instrumental, or collective studies (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). Intrinsic case studies focus on the case itself, as being unique (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2013). A program review is sometimes an example of an intrinsic study. An instrumental case study examines an issue or phenomenon and selects a location to study it (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). Collective or multiple case studies examine an issue or phenomenon in several selected locations. For this study, the phenomenon of RTI implementation was viewed and bound at one location. This study was a single instrumental case looking to gain insight and understanding into the phenomenon in its natural setting.

For this qualitative case study, I was the instrument and researcher that gathered the data from observations, interviews, and school artifacts. Aligning with the qualitative tradition and interpretive paradigm, this study’s broad questions leading with how and what guided the analysis of interviews, observations, and pertinent artifacts on RTI. “Case study has proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, for evaluating programs, and for
informing policy” (Merriam, 1998, p. 41). This study looked to broaden people’s understanding of the complexities surrounding the implementation of an integrated RTI framework into an elementary school setting by examining a case site and participants’ experiences beyond the initial years of implementation. I ensured the participants’ experiences remained central to the study by writing rich descriptions from their interviews and observations. The qualitative case study on RTI followed a qualitative case study’s unique attributes (Merriam, 1998) that are described in Table 4.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes of Qualitative Case Studies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distinctive Attributes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Particularistic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Descriptive</td>
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<td>Heuristic</td>
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In New Mexico public schools, educators implemented a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework that evolved into an integrated model of intervention. Organizational and educational change theories describe educators’ challenges to implement change efforts because education reforms are challenging to implement and sustain. Supporting core components of RTI, such as tiered instruction and progress monitoring intertwined with professional development and leadership, remain some of the challenges to implementation.

By analyzing the case site within an elementary school, this study examines how RTI implementation changed the educational setting at an urban elementary school in New Mexico.
Through interviews with a variety of stakeholders, such as teachers and administrators, the researcher further expands understanding around educators’ perspectives on RTI beyond the initial years of implementation into their school. These perceptions help unpack the study’s research questions around organizational change, teaching practices, leadership, culture, collaboration, and allocation of resources for interventions.

There are two layers to a case study, the case site organization, and the participants. The first layer in this study is an elementary school. Observations in the natural setting, as described in field notes, help examine the case site. Document analysis also connects the study’s research questions to the phenomenon being studied. This document analysis also supports the understanding of the case organization. The second level in the case study examines the participants’ understanding of the case site and participant interviews.

**Summary**

The interpretive paradigm guides the focus of this study, methods, and approach to data gathering and analysis, and how to collect raw data toward findings and conclusions. The ultimate goal of this qualitative study is to construct knowledge obtained from multiple data sources. This study examines the participants’ experiences with implementing an integrated RTI framework, even if this knowledge is gained through some form of participation. Researchers acknowledge that some participation is possible by the researcher in this type of study (Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 2010; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995).

Within the interpretive paradigm and for this qualitative study, I am the primary collector of data thought interaction within the environment, whether observing or interviewing. When in the natural setting of the elementary school, this close collaboration with participants enables them to share their stories and uncover their hidden knowledge of RTI implementation. I hope to
gain a better understanding of the participant’s actions in relation to the impact of RTI.

Subjectivity and interaction in qualitative studies are necessary and assumed as part of the study’s design (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Crotty, 2010; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Merriam (1998) suggests that the natural setting was rarely disrupted by the presence of the researcher.

A qualitative case study approach provides a rich in-depth analysis of educator’s perceptions in a natural setting (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2009). By analyzing educator’s perceptions and experiences with the educational reform effort, the findings inform practices within schools and address gaps in the literature on integrated models that are sustained over time. A qualitative case study is appropriate for answering questions surrounding RTI implementation. The findings add to the growing body of literature on RTI implementation. These findings also benefit other professionals in elementary schools who work on implementing an integrated RTI model. While there is much research on schooling, Seidman (2006) describes how "little of it is based on the perspectives of students, teachers, administrators ... whose individual and collective experience constitutes schooling" (p. 10). To understand the impact of RTI’s implementation in a school setting, a qualitative case methods approach best meets the needs of this study.

In the next section, the case site is reviewed. Participation and access to the case site are discussed in the following section after the case site description.

Case Site

In the state of New Mexico, poverty, food insecurity, child abuse, and neglect impact children negatively. Adverse experiences increase the likelihood of a child being delayed in their learning and lacking necessary skills to be successful in schooling (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016; Burke et al. 2011); students may even develop behavioral problems due to these
experiences (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016; Burke et al., 2011; Evans & Kim, 2013). Stoiber and Gettinger (2016) found that the RTI framework in schools makes available a service delivery system that better supports all students, but it makes a substantial difference for those most at-risk.

Established in 1994, The Contigo Elementary School is part of the Cactus School District in New Mexico. Both the Contigo Elementary School and Cactus School District are pseudonyms used to protect the identity of the participating school and school district. The Contigo Elementary School accommodates the growing population of the surrounding area. Presently, this urban elementary school educates 740 students, 33% requiring free or reduced meals, and 12% requiring special education services. The school’s demographics are 3.6% African-American, 3.0% American Indian, 1.6% Asian/Pacific, 42.9% Caucasian (non-Hispanic), and 48.7% Hispanic. Research at a school setting with this type of diversity adds to the literature because much of it focuses on Caucasian students who speak English (Brown-Chidsey & Bickford, 2016).

**Historical Background of Educational Change at Site**

Since 2004, the elementary school has utilized a social and emotional intervention framework called Positive Behavior and Supports (PBS), also known in the literature as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). The school has twelve years of PBIS implementation experience.

The state of New Mexico mandated integrated RTI framework for all schools in 2007. The Contigo Elementary School began implementing and phasing in an academic RTI framework over the past nine years. In 2009, the school adopted state designations for the use of a dual discrepancy model in grades K – 3. In conjunction with an IQ test, the dual discrepancy
model in grades K – 3 allowed progress monitoring data and other performance data to be considered in the evaluation process. As a result, schools looked to adjust and add assessments that would demonstrate student growth over time and progress monitoring, thus meeting the dual assessment requirements for special education eligibility.

Due to RTI implementation, the school has implemented K – 12 universal screening assessments, such as Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) from the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA). This assessment tool, as well as others in core curricular programs, has provided progress monitoring in reading and mathematics. Curricular adoptions in reading and mathematics have been implemented in the past three years to align the core curriculum to the mandated Common Core Standards.

The New Mexico Common Core Standards were adopted in 2011 and phased into schools and districts, effectively being fully implemented by 2015. The Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College or Careers (PARCC) assessed New Mexican student performance in 2015. The assessment was given to students in grades 3 – 12 in 2015.

At the building level, educators have grappled with curricular changes, alignment, adoptions, and new assessments to meet the increasing demands of accountability for student learning. With all these competing efforts, Contigo Elementary School has continued to demonstrate positive student performance for the past three years, as determined by the state A – F school grading system. In 2015, the school was only one of twelve schools demonstrating high levels of growth across student improvement for the highest and lowest performers and overall school student growth. The elementary school has earned a B in 2014, an A in 2015, and a B in 2016; the school average grade is a B over the three years.
In the next section, I discuss participants and access. Specifically, the sampling of both the case site and participants are presented for the study.

Participants and Access

In this qualitative case study, the case analyzes two viewpoints, namely the organization of elementary school and the participant’s experiences with the phenomenon of RTI implementation. This section describes the criteria to be utilized in determining the school organization, then describes how participants were selected for this study.

Sixteen educators participated in this qualitative case study. The participants had experience in implementing the RTI framework in an elementary school setting, where both academic and social needs were being addressed across the student body. For this study, the case setting and participants had experience with the phenomenon being studied, which for the study was an integrated RTI framework. The RTI framework had been implemented for several years at the case site. The longevity of the implementation of both academics and social sides of the RTI framework into the case site helped to ingrain it into school practices. Longevity of implementation was considered an important factor for case site selection. Additionally, students in this case site elementary school demonstrated effective student performance for three concurring years, as determined by the state assessment given to third, fourth, and fifth graders. In qualitative case studies, sampling took place at two levels, the organization or case site, and the participants.

Sampling the Case Site

To select the case site, purposeful sampling was employed to find a case of an urban elementary school’s integrated RTI framework. Merriam (1998) suggested that “a single case or small non-random sample is selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the
particular in-depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many” (p.208). Purposeful sampling was useful in qualitative studies where a selected case or participants’ knowledge and experiences purposefully supported understanding the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). Purposeful sampling was very appropriate to use in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). “Purposive or purposeful sampling usually occurs before the data are gathered, whereas theoretical sampling is done in conjunction with data collection” (Merriam, 1998, p. 66). This qualitative case study engaged at an in-depth level of the school organization to directly gather information about the experiences and perceptions of the participants.

Criterion-based sampling was employed to ensure that the natural setting in which the case study was conducted had experience with the phenomenon being examined, in this case, RTI (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009). To be considered for the study, the RTI framework in the case site had to be implemented beyond the first few initials years. This study added to the literature by understanding established RTI framework, as much of the present research focuses on the initial three years of implementation (Gibbons & Coulter, 2016; Miller & Freeman, 2016; Scollins, 2016; Wixson, 2011). It added to the literature on integrated RTI models, which remained scarce in the literature due to their complexity and the need for the long-term commitment of implementation (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). The following criteria for inclusion or exclusion of the study were used for criterion-based sampling purposes:

- Case site has implemented an integrated RTI framework, both academic and social interventions;
- Case site has implemented an integrated RTI framework for at least four years;
● Case site’s performance on statewide assessments for the three most concurring years demonstrates positive student growth and performance where school performance grade average of a B letter grade or better over the three years;

● Case site presented a diverse student population where at most 49% of the school is Caucasian;

● At least 25% case site student population presented needing free and reduced lunch; and,

● The case site student population was at least 500 students.

The case site criteria listed above supported this study’s efforts to examine a case site where RTI has been implemented over a period of time. Also, the criteria also addressed the gap in RTI literature through the inclusion of diverse populations.

Purposeful selection or purposeful sampling was utilized as the means for the researcher to choose people and a setting that presented the most promise and usefulness (Merriam, 1998). Purposeful sampling for this study entailed finding an urban elementary school that has an integrated model of RTI and demonstrated high levels of student growth based upon the state examination. School letter grades in New Mexico were predominantly based on student improvement and growth (NM PED, 2015a). In 2015, only twelve schools out of 820 in New Mexico received A letter grades across student improvement for the highest and lowest performers and overall school student growth.

This qualitative case study took place at a kindergarten through fifth grade urban elementary public school in New Mexico. The elementary school for this study earned an A rating in 2015 and was one of the twelve schools showing the highest levels of student improvement and growth in New Mexico. The elementary school incorporated social and
emotional supports for students in the school’s RTI framework. Additionally, the school had provided RTI instruction and interventions for over K – 3 dual discrepancy since 2009 when it was approved in New Mexico.

Sampling the Participants

Participants in a qualitative study provided access to unique experiences and special stories about the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). By doing a smaller sample of individuals in qualitative research, an intimate knowledge of the participant's experience and the context of their actions can be explored (Maxwell, 2005). The participants from the case site in this study consisted of administrators, regular education teachers, and special education staff who experienced RTI implementation for at least three years or currently leading or led RTI implementation efforts.

Two types of purposeful sampling often recommended for qualitative studies are criterion-based with range and variation sampling. Criterion-based sampling helps ensure that the participants and case sites under study have experiences with the phenomenon being studied and can provide data to answer the research questions of the study (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009). Additionally, criterion-based sampling also ensures that key constituents will also be represented in the study (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003).

In qualitative research, the researcher seeks to learn and understand a phenomenon from a particular case (Bassey, 1999; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). For this study, the qualitative case study examines RTI implementation from the participants’ experiences. To be considered for the study, the RTI framework in the case site has to be implemented beyond the first few initials years. This study adds to the literature by understanding established RTI framework, as much of the present research focuses on the initial three years of implementation
This study adds to the literature on integrated RTI models, which remains scarce in the literature due to the complexity and need for the persistence of implementation (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). Due to the importance of leadership in implementation efforts, participants who held a leadership position supporting RTI implementation were considered for the study. Additionally, participants with longevity at the school site are considered due to the study’s focus on changes due to years of RTI implementation. The following criteria for inclusion or exclusion of the study were used for criterion-based sampling purposes:

- Participants selected for the study have at least four years of experience implementing RTI at the case site, or
- Participants hold or held a leadership position supporting the implementation of the RTI framework.

Range and variation were applied in the study for purposeful sampling purposes (Bassey, 1999; Creswell, 2013; Creswell, 2009; Flick, 2009; Merriam, 1998). Range and variation allowed the researcher to differentiate possible participants and required specific characteristics for participation in the study. To maximize variations, the researcher determined common themes or variations that cut across the case. A sampling of participants, according to the range and variation sampling, was explained after the case site sampling was detailed. For the selection of this study, the case site had to be implementing an integrated RTI model, where academics and social supports were provided to students. The case site had implemented the RTI integrated framework for at least four years at the elementary level; therefore, the researcher studied an integrated RTI framework beyond the first few years of implementation. The elementary school case site also demonstrated positive student growth by receiving an average of A or B, as
determined by the state assessment for at least three recent years. To be considered for the study, participants at the case site needed to experience RTI implementation for at least four years or were part of the leadership team implementing RTI. A case site had already been identified that met the criteria for this study.

One of the benefits of purposeful sampling with range and variation was to have a diverse group of participants to help understand the phenomenon under study (Bassey, 1999; Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009; Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). Ritchie, Lewis, and Elam (2003) recommended several factors, including age, gender, and type of role. For this study, a range of factors was considered to gain access to a diverse set of participants, including the demographics of participants. The following areas for participants inclusion or exclusion were considered at elementary school case site: educational role(s) (e.g., administrator, regular education teacher, or special education teaching staff), type of educational job (e.g., grade level of teacher, speech and language pathologist, counselor, diagnostician, reading teacher, instructional coach, or education technology specialist), educational level (e.g., bachelors, masters, or doctorate), special certification in reading or national board certification, school leadership role, years implementing RTI, years implementing RTI in the school setting under study, gender, and age. To ensure a purposeful sample; table 5 visualized a matrix that guided the range and variation of participants.
Table 5

Sample Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Sampling Quota</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Educational Role         | At least one administrator  
At least four general education teachers  
At least four special education staff |
| Educational Level of Participant | At least four participants who have a bachelor's degree  
At least four participants have a master’s degree |
| Special Certification of Participant | At least one participant has a specialization in reading or is national board-certified |
| School Leadership Role   | At least one administrator  
At least two general education teachers  
At least two special education teaching staff |
| Years implementing RTI   | At least one participant implementing an integrated RTI framework for at least seven years  
At least four participants implementing four or more years |
| Years implementing RTI at the case site | At least two participants implementing RTI in the case site for four or more years  
At least one participant implementing RTI in the case site for six or more years |
| Gender                   | At least six female participants  
At least one male participant |
| Age                      | At least one participant 25-30  
At least one participant 31-39  
At least one participant 40-49  
At least one participant 50+ |

- **Educational Role**: The professional name of participant’s job, (e.g., administrator, counselor, general education teacher with grade levels noted, special education staff and teacher with grade levels noted)

- **Educational Level of Participant**: Participants with a bachelor, masters, and doctorate degrees, if available, was included

- **Special Certification of Participant**: Special certifications, such as National Board Certification or reading certifications was noted and considered when selecting
participants for interviews; reading certificates, such as Reading Recovery and other specialized training in reading as determined by the district

- **School Leadership Role:** Participants were selected to participate in the study if they work in the school site in a leadership role that impacts or influences RTI practices (e.g., grade-level chair, SAT coordinator, School Leadership Team, or other leadership roles as noted by the school site)

- **Years Implementing RTI:** Participants were to note how long they have been implementing RTI

- **Years Implementing RTI at Case Site:** Participants acknowledged how long they have worked on RTI implementation at the case site; participants had at least four years of RTI implementation at the case site or held a leadership position to be included in the study

- **Years working in K-12 public education:** Participants noted how long they had worked in K – 12 public education

- **Years working at the Case Site:** Participants noted how many years working at the case site

- **Gender:** Male and female participants brought different perspectives to the organization. The organization was predominately female administrators and teachers. Men were included in the study.

- **Age:** A range of various participants’ ages were sought as different aged members may experience the changes of RTI implementation differently, especially around issues of progress monitoring and technology.

Due to the gender of the school’s staff, the participants were predominately female. There were only five male teachers working at the case site; two of the male teachers work at the same
grade level. Male subjects were included to provide a diverse sample. For this study, administrators and teachers sought to participate; table 6 charts the number of participants, interview type with participants, role, and gender.

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>16 people in total for the study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Semi-structured Interviews</td>
<td>14 people for individual interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Participants in Focus Group 1</td>
<td>2 people for focus group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>2 administrators and 14 teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>3 men and 13 women</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participants’ demographic data is further detailed in chapter four.

Seidman (2006) explains that sufficiency and saturation are necessary points to understand when developing a purposeful sample. Sufficiency is the range of understanding that participants bring to understanding the phenomenon. Saturation is the point in the data gathering where no new information is being generated or gathered that furthers understanding of the phenomenon in connection to the research questions (Merriam, 1998). Due to the range generated in the purposeful sampling matrix in Table 5, a diverse set of participants provided sufficiency to the study.

The study’s voluntary participants were invited to either partake in an interview or focus group. A total of fourteen administrators and teachers were sought for individual interviews. One focus group of two participants were organized for this study. Due to New Mexico’s RTI dual discrepancy focus on grades K – 3, the focus group had a representation of at least one
participant who taught students in K – 3 grades. The principal and assistant principal were interviewed separately from the staff. The principal has worked at the school for twenty years, while the assistant principal worked in the school in a variety of roles as a teacher and assistant principal in the building.

To gain access to the participants, I sought permission from several stakeholders who oversee the research process. First, I sought permission from Northeastern’s Internal Review Board (IRB) to complete the study as proposed. Once given approval, I corresponded with the Superintendent’s Office of the District where the study was completed. Once given permission from the Superintendent’s Office, the District’s research department required paperwork to be completed, which was similar to the IRB paperwork. The school site principal and staff were contacted through two separate emails noting the requirements for participation in the study. The correspondence highlighted safeguards for staff who wished to participate. The next section described the protection of human subjects for this study.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

To address the protection of human subjects, this section examines how I recruited participants and the organization to participate in the qualitative case study. Next, informed consent and protections describe how human subjects understood their roles and anonymity within the study. Then, data storage and destruction of documentation provide further protections for participants' privacy and anonymity. Finally, Northeastern’s IRB process for this study contributes to the ethical considerations undertaken to protect human subjects in this study.

It should be noted that this researcher did at one-time work in the school district but was employed at a different elementary school for two years. Since I was familiar with the district, district staff, and some school staff, it was an advantage for access; this reflexivity advantage
helped engage others in supporting the study’s completion (Laughland-Booñ, Mayall, & Skrbiš, 2015). I had minimal contact with members working in the district since my resignation in June 2015. To remove and lessen any anxiety around possible feelings of coercion or pressure to participate, I followed Northeastern’s Internal Review Board (IRB) guidelines to ensure participants felt comfortable partaking in the study.

**Recruitment**

I sought a supervisor’s permission prior to gathering data. A letter of institutional cooperation (Appendix A) was emailed to the superintendent to gain permission. A letter to the elementary principal was sent to gain access to the case site (Appendix B). I also had to gain approval for the research through the Northeastern IRB process. The district also required the researcher to submit their own research related documents, similar to the IRB forms, to their Research Assessment Data Achievement (RADA) department. The researcher provided the necessary documentation to the university and district office to gain acceptance of this qualitative case study. A brief description of the educational case study was noted on the following correspondences: district recruitment letter (Appendix A), elementary school invitation to participate letter (Appendix B), and recruitment email to elementary staff (Appendix C).

An email was used to correspond with the district, school, and staff. Within these communications, the reasons why the organization was selected were shared with the participants (Stake, 1995). The letter included a brief description of the nature and purpose of the research that will be conducted (Seidman, 2006). Information pertaining to confidentiality was noted and assured for individual interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect staff who volunteered to participate. Participants assigned a pseudonym name, as long it is not too recognizable or close to their real name. All transcriptions were de-identified so that participants
remained anonymous. After transcription, I cleaned out each page of the document and deleted any references to individual participants’ real names, students, or other identifiable factors like the school and district name. No names of children or families were collected, except in one instance where a parent did sign and wrote the student’s name on a consent form, which granted me permission to observe and attend an SAT meeting. One parent conference called into an SAT meeting and gave verbal permission for my observation. The parents did not attend the other two meetings. In the transcription cleaning, two brackets noted the substitution from Ms. Smith to the pseudonym [Ms. Penny]. This process helped to de-identify participants and revealed the case site. My contact information is included in case a participant wants to contact me.

The school district supported the research by the following: a) established a time for leadership to discuss RTI implementation, b) allowed observations at the case site. c) provided access to requested RTI documents, and d) provided access to teachers and administrators who participated in the study. The participants selected to participate in the study by the design of the study provided the greatest understanding and connection to the impact of RTI implementation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Written permission was a typical practice in research and was discussed next. Researchers (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Seider, 2006) found that gatekeepers were important in completing a study in the organization. The superintendent, chief academic officer, and case site school principal supported the completion of this study.

The principal and assistant principal were key people to gain insight and information for the recruitment of staff. They provided lists of teaching staff with designated leadership roles in the school. Teachers held leadership positions such as grade level chairs, coordinators, instructional leaders or coaches, or committee chairs. The building administrators also provided a list of committees and team members. The administrator recommended to the student researcher
names of teams and individuals that they thought would participate in the study and met the sampling requirements. The student researcher recruited directly from these staff lists via either email or verbal conversation.

**Informed Consent**

Since interviews were a significant part of the research study, a written consent form was provided and reviewed with voluntary participants. Individual and focus group interviews were scheduled around these participants’ availability during the school day or after it. Participation was completely voluntary. Interviews were conducted at the elementary school to support a comfortable working environment. The interview guide questions (Appendix D and Appendix E) and informed consent form (Appendix F, Appendix G, and Appendix H) were shared with participants prior to the interview so they could review the document and lessen any anxiety in their participation. Informed consent for observation parent form (Appendix I) was reviewed with a parent prior to an SAT meeting. There were two different interview guides and three informed consent documents due to the study’s data collection process, the use of semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, and observations. The research goals, the purpose of the study, and detailed protocols were clearly delineated in written informed consent paperwork (Yin, 2009) and reviewed at the time of the interview. Each participant signed and initialed an informed consent form. These forms were returned to me prior to beginning an interview. I kept each participant’s signed informed consent for three years in keeping with Northeastern’s IRB process. Copies of the informed consent were given to each participant with my signature.

Participants were asked to complete a confidential online demographic survey prior to interviews (Appendix J). The survey was sent through Google forms from my student account.
The survey was a quick way to gain knowledge about the participants and career history. The survey asked for information pertaining to gender, race, educational history, work history, and questions probing their experiences with RTI, any special certifications, and held leadership positions, with each area being relevant to the study.

Written statements pertaining to participants' right to participate, not to participate, or withdraw from the study were shared in the consent form (Creswell, 2009). It was discussed that if a participant did not wish to answer a question during the interview, the person said so, and the interviewer moved on to the next question or person. Information about the study's possible broader impact on research and member checking of statements by participants were also communicated (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). If concerns arose around a comment or statement by the participant, the researcher would comply with the request to remove it from the study or findings if requested. Participants would able to withdraw from the study until their data was entered into the research record. Once the data has been analyzed, it remained as part of the study. The interviews took place in Contigo Elementary School, and only study participants and this researcher were present during this discussion. The entire discussion was audio-recorded, but no one was identified by name on the recording, except for the focus group participants who knew each other and used their real names in the audio. I changed their names in the transcripts to their pseudonyms. The audio was kept on a secure computer that was password protected in a locked office. The information recorded was confidential, and no one else except the audio transcribers from Rev.com, had access to the audio file. While the transcription service company representative did not sign my confidentiality agreement (Appendix J), the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of Rev.com and I entered into a non-disclosure agreement where Rev.com ensured the confidentiality of data that was processed by their transcribers. The audio files are
scheduled to be destroyed after meeting graduation requirements and compliance standards for
the storage of data. The audio files are scheduled to be destroyed two weeks after the dissertation
is complete and accepted. Focus group members were asked not to talk to people outside the
group about what was said in the group. Additionally, the researcher asked each participant to
keep what was said in the group confidential.

To ensure minimal harm to participants, recruitment of staff was only tenured staff in the
district. The tenured staff has protections within the administrative and teacher contracts that
provide clear guidelines in dealing with coercive or retaliatory supervisors. The contracts
explained how the staff members should report, react, and whom to gain contact to resolve issues
with the supervisor in question. Furthermore, I ensured that supervisors do not know who the
participants in the study were by masking staff names and limiting their knowledge about the
interviews for the study.

**Data Storage and Destruction**

Data storage of documents and notes needs to be kept securely (Yin, 2009). Therefore, I
utilized Creswell's (2013) principles for data storage and handling as my guide for storing data. I
developed backup copies of the computer files. Also, I developed a master list of all masked or
coded information gathered and used within the study. Within the transcriptions and other
documents gathered at the case, participants’ names were masked for confidentiality reasons.
When analyzing documents, field notes, or interviews, I developed a data collection matrix in the
NVivo, a data analysis software, that helped identify individual pieces of data.

To support the development of a master list of the data matrix, pertinent information was
recorded and secured in a password-protected spreadsheet. This information was only be shared
with the principle investigator, Dr. Bennett. On this master list, information such as participant’s
name, pseudonym, date interviewed, signed informed consent, contact information, title, and confirmed member checking was managed. Semi-structured and focus group interviews were documented in this manner. Table 7 is an example of the master list of the data matrix. I did not present the real master list due to ensuring the confidentiality of the participants.

Table 7

Data Storage and Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant’s Name</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Date interviewed</th>
<th>Signed Informed Consent</th>
<th>Contact Information</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Member Checking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Smith</td>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>09-18-17</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td><a href="mailto:smith@gmail.com">smith@gmail.com</a></td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data files identifiable with specific labels, which helped maintain organization and access to this information, was part of the master list of the data matrix. These files were labeled with a key identifying term at the front of the file’s name. The data gathering method was used in these cases at the beginning of the file’s name. Semi-structured interviews were abbreviated as a file SSI; focus group interviews were abbreviated FGI. Dates, job titles, and pseudonyms were part of creating an identifiable matrix list. Document files were scanned and labeled as document and number; a word for context may be used to provide insight into the contents of the file. Table 8 demonstrates how I built and labeled the various data gathered through this process with the master list of the data matrix. The data was uploaded into NVivo, the data software program, that I used to organize and analyze each piece of data.
Table 8

Data Storage Part 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Gathered</th>
<th>File Name</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Transcription SSI Principal 1-11-18</td>
<td>Amelia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Transcription SSI AP 7-26-18</td>
<td>Fiona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Transcription SSI K Teacher 5-9-18</td>
<td>Ella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Transcription SSI First Grade Teacher 4-10-18</td>
<td>Isla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Transcription SSI Second Grade Teacher 4-6-18</td>
<td>Ivy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group interview</td>
<td>Focus Group Third And Fifth Grade Teachers SLT 5</td>
<td>Victoria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Transcription SSI Fourth Grade Teacher 4-11-18</td>
<td>Maggie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group interview</td>
<td>Focus Group Third And Fifth Grade Teachers SLT 5</td>
<td>Oliver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Transcription SSI Reading Interventionist 03-21-18</td>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Transcription SSI P.E. 1-22-18</td>
<td>Reginald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Transcription Teacher of Gifted 5-7-18</td>
<td>Lucia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Transcription SSI Instructional Coach 4-9-18</td>
<td>Dakota</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Transcription SSI Special Education Instruction Leader 4-11-18</td>
<td>George</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Transcript SSI Ed Tech Emily 1-25-18</td>
<td>Emily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Transcription SSI Special Educator K-2 teacher 4-4-18</td>
<td>Ana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured interview</td>
<td>Transcription SSI Guidance 03-20-18</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation 1PD 1</td>
<td>Observation1 PD K-5 010818</td>
<td>See document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation 2 PD 2</td>
<td>Observation2 PD 3-5 013118</td>
<td>See document</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Loose articles, such as observation notes and journals, were kept locked in the car when on-site or home office file cabinet. Data was stored on a personal computer that required access codes. Electronic passwords were used on computers and files that hold identifiable files or reports, as recommended by Creswell (2013). When on-site, the data collected was stored either in a locked car or on the personal computer that is securely password protected. An installed program, NVivo, was used to code and store data. A locked file cabinet stored personal notes or
other hard information from the study. All loose data and uploaded files collected will be
destroyed one year after the conclusion of the study. In accordance with IRB guidelines,
participant consent forms will be stored for one year after the project is completed and shredded
in compliance with the guidelines. The Northeastern Blackboard website was utilized as a means
to share information with the principal investigator, Dr. Elisabeth Bennett. The information
shared on this site will be deleted at the conclusion of the study.

Last, the destruction and cleaning of documents and files need to ensure that student,
parent, and participant names were not attached to any of the data gathered. Identifiable data
gathered will be destroyed a year after completion of the study. Papers with real names of
participants or case sites will be shredded, and identifiable computer files will be deleted along
with any backup copies of papers and computer files. De-identified data, like from transcripts
with pseudonyms, will be kept indefinitely. As mentioned, informed consent will be kept for
three years after completion of the study. To summarize, identifiable files, papers, or documents
will be destroyed; de-identified files, papers, and documents like transcripts will be kept
indeinitely.

**IRB Approval**

Northeastern University’s Internal Review Board (IRB) reviewed the study to protect
against human rights violations. The IRB considered the safety of vulnerable populations, such
as children, pregnant women, and prisoners. To be considered for IRB review, this study outlined
the protocols that safeguarded the population being studied and articulate my ethical obligations
as a researcher. Once IRB approval was granted, the research department of the school district
also required similar IRB documentation to be completed prior to participant recruitment. For
this study, I studied in a professional work setting of an elementary school where there was
minimal risk to the population being studied. Student names were not be collected at any time in the study, except in one instance where a parent signed informed consent for observation parent form (Appendix I). Participants were selected and disguised their true identity through pseudonyms. The purpose of the research as well as how participants were selected, had been clearly articulated in written and verbal communications with participants and nonparticipants. I provided assurances to participants verbally and in written communication that they may withdraw from the study until their information is part of the study.

**Ethical Considerations**

The protection of human subjects is essential for a research study to address prior to moving forward into data gathering stages (Creswell, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Merriam, 1998). Flick (2009) and Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden (2001) explain that there are three areas that a study needs to address: respect for the person, beneficence, and justice. Respect for a person is the trust developed with the participants. Beneficence is how the study should provide some form of benefit due to the research yet minimizes harm to the participants of the study. Justice is the balance and respect between the participants and the researcher.

In this study, I established an understanding of trust and respect by clearly articulating several key areas for the participants in the study. To ensure this understanding and development of trust and respect, the purpose of the study was clearly noted, and their right to decide to participate in it was explained. I explained that the participant had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. I acknowledged through the informed consent and other verbal communication the participant’s rights and their ability to exert or exercise these rights. The goal was to have an autonomous source of information for the study. By acknowledging and discussing their rights to
participate or not to participate in the study, I tried to establish a level of trust with the participants in their natural setting.

With the notion of respect of person, I had to respectfully navigate the school organization and its members. One can be respectful toward the institution and participants by following the district and school procedures for completing a research study. Creswell (2009) recommends accessing the case site through a gatekeeper, someone from inside the organization that helps the researcher navigate access for the study and to participants. I gained access to the site for data collection through gatekeepers. Creswell (2009) suggested that the research sites be respected by leaving the site undisturbed after the study. In this study, prolonged engagement with the site through observations and interviews, minimize disruptions to daily life in the natural setting, visits ensured the site is left undisturbed. Merriam (1998) also noted that subjects were often not disturbed by participating.

Beneficence was explained as the researcher preventing harm or minimizing it as much as possible in relation to the participant and doing right or good by the individual while the research provides some sort of benefit (Flick, 2009; Orb et al., 2001). One way to support the participant and minimize difficulty was to have the participant approve the use of quotations in the study prior to publication. This act ensured the participant’s ideas and thoughts were acknowledged. The acknowledgment also provided efforts to maintain autonomy in the study. If the participant did not want certain words associated with him or herself, the wording was revised or deleted.

Participants had been assigned pseudonyms for the study on the first day of data collection. I was the only one who was able to determine the participant’s identity. Identities were carefully logged onto an electronic file that had a security password. Participants in focus
groups were asked to maintain confidentiality as part of this process. Participants that earned tenure in their district felt safe to participate; tenure right was given to teachers in their third year of teaching service. Any coercive acts by administrators were communicated to human research and the teacher union. The benefit of the study was communicated to participants and nonparticipants alike. These actions helped form trust and cooperation with the individuals in the study while minimizing harm to the participants and nonparticipants.

While confidentiality is important, it may be hard to maintain at the local level (Merriam, 1998). If a participant has major concerns, they will disguise the individual in the study by providing misinformation or removing certain identifying information (Seidman, 2006). If necessary, I will actively disguise the identity of a participant if requested by the participant due to concerns around their identity being noted. For example, if a male teacher has a concern around being the only participant in the study, I may change the gender in the reported information to better disguise the participant.

In the study, I did not have to actively disguise a participant. With the exception of the principle investigator who was the chairperson of the dissertation committee, I did not discuss or disclose names, teaching location, or identifiers that may lead someone to determine the location of the study or the case site’s participants.

Justice was described as the act of treating people with fairness when it relates to participants and the researcher (Flick, 2009; Orb et al., 2001). For this study, I acknowledged the contributions of the participants. Additionally, the guidelines that were in place for the study also requested that participants grant permission to use their ideas and quotations. I hoped to proactively address issues between the researcher and participant by clarifying questions or emerging themes after interviews. I ensured data used in the study was acknowledged and
approved by the participants by having participants review a member checking document, summarizing key themes and findings, definitions, and a few selected quotations from participants. Another way in which I balanced the study was to recognize the minority voices within the study, as recommended for this approach for qualitative studies (Creswell, 2013; Kvale, 2009; Maxwell, 2005).

In summary, the protection of human subjects was imperative for any empirical study. This study by design was communicating and detailing the procedures to safeguard the participants and nonparticipants. The IRB process, recruitment efforts, and informed consent outlined some of the participants’ protections for this study. The safeguarding for material gathered along with the data’s destruction was established for this study. Ethical considerations defined for this study worked to establish a working relationship with the organization under study at the case site and detailed protections for the participants and organization. In the following section, data collection for this qualitative case study is described.

**Data Collection**

In this section, the study’s data collection techniques examine a range of options that align with the qualitative tradition and case study methodology. First, an overview of the data collection methods describes this study’s rationale for using them. Next, this study requires an examination of data gathering because of the many facets of the study. A review of the methods in this section describe the following designs: semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, observations, document analysis, and field notes.

Data collection in qualitative case studies includes multiple methods of data gathering (Bassey, 1999; Creswell, 2013; Crotty, 2010; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Individual interviews and focus group interviews are two methods that were used in this study. Stake (1995) views
interviews as the means of “discovery and portraying the multiple views of the case” (p. 64).
Observations and document analysis are additional methods that study the phenomenon in the
natural setting and help ground the research of the case study into the organization of the case
site.

Document analysis and observations were used as a data-gathering method and were
discussed as part of this study. Through the data collection methods, I hoped to gain individual,
group, and organizational understanding of the impact of RTI on the organization. The
conceptual framework and research questions guided each method’s approach. Essentially, I
wanted to engage the case site and participants in storytelling and reflection on the impact of RTI
implementation through these data gathering methods.

Stake (1995) suggested that qualitative case study research analyzes the complexity of a
single case through its activities, participants’ experiences, and important circumstances.
Maxwell (2005) described how the researcher not only samples participants through interviews,
but also examines the settings, processes, and events that shape the phenomenon. For this
qualitative case study, I utilized a variety of data collection methods to examine RTI
implementation and its complex impact in a school setting by examining how educators
perceived changes to teaching practices, leadership, and school culture in an urban elementary
school. The conceptual framework and research questions for this study guided the selection of
questions and tools in this case study. I gathered information from voluntary participants through
semi-structured one-on-one interviews or focus group interviews. “Interviewing is also the best
technique to use when conducting intensive case studies of a few selected individuals” (Merriam,
1998, p. 72). Stake (1995) further stated that interviews were the main instrument “to
discovering and portraying the multiple views of the case” (p. 64). Yin (2009) explained that
how questions usually were a better choice than why questions, as these questions, may make the participant defensive. For the study, the questions and protocols used for data gathering engaged participants in reflection and storytelling on how RTI impacted the school. Yin (2009) recommended that obtaining multiple perspectives across the organization is a helpful approach to data gathering. This study employed an approach where sampling provides multiple perspectives from across the elementary school.

Baskarada (2014) suggested that interviews from people within the organization should be treated fairly and with equal weight. While senior leadership offered one perspective, it is just as viable as the rest of the membership in the organization. In the study, I interviewed a range of participants within the school setting. The range and variation in the sample balanced those in leadership positions equally with other participants. The semi-structured interviews and focus groups guided discussions that answered the research questions on how the organization changed due to the impact of RTI implementation. Through the course of conversations, interviewees suggested other pertinent people to interview or suggested documents relevant to the study. As such, qualitative case studies were a flexible approach to data gathering that allowed me to consider a new opportunity or information that had not been anticipated prior to data gathering.

Observations of professional development, Student Assistance Teams (SATs), and Grade Level/Collaborative Teacher Teams (CTTs) meetings provided additional information on how staff address at-risk students and the RTI framework. I examined key documents such as RTI documents and other pertinent information involving the sustainability of RTI. Table 9 provides a snapshot of data that may be collected over the course of the study.
Table 9

*Brief Summary of Data Collected from the Case Site*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Contigo Elementary School</strong></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Days on site</strong></td>
<td>27 days (not in a row)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Participants</strong></td>
<td>16 people in total for the study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Semi-structured Interviews</strong></td>
<td>14 people for individual interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Participants in Focus Group 1</strong></td>
<td>2 people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Documents Reviewed</strong></td>
<td>7 documents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Observations of RTI teams</strong></td>
<td>11 meetings in total: 4 SAT; 1 RTI; 3 CTTs; 1 Grade Level Placement; and 2 PD meetings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The task of obtaining teachers' views on the reform efforts and changes was a vital goal of this research study (Flores & Alonso, 1995). Reading teachers, regular education teachers, administrators, and special education teachers each were impacted by RTI implementation. Occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech pathologists also played a role in providing early interventions to students. Diagnosticians, school psychologists, and guidance counselors were also influenced by the organization change mandated by RTI. Access to this type of information helped see how staff responded to students’ needs and implemented RTI changes over time. Since the change process occurred at the individual level and was perceived from the person’s own experiences (Miller & Freeman, 2016), a qualitative case study on educator’s perspective in an urban elementary school on RTI implementation beyond the initial years was pertinent. The participants’ experiences and case sites were at the local level of RTI implementation.
The gathering of information through the sampling stops once data reaches a saturation point and becomes redundant (Creswell, 2013; Seidman, 2006). Saturation occurs once no new information is being gathered that furthers the understanding of the qualitative case study. By using a variety of sampling methods, educators’ perceptions of the changes due to RTI implementation and sustainability reaches a saturation point as determined by the researcher.

Within this school context, the researcher explored the uniqueness and wholeness of the bounded case (Tight, 2010). “Qualitative researches can reveal how all the parts of the study form a whole” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). This approach explored the phenomenon from multiple data sources and perspectives to facilitate understanding of the case (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Creswell, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995). The next sections describe the researcher’s approach and procedures to data collection, specifically semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, observations, approach to documents analysis, and the use of field notes.

**Semi-structured interviews**

Most interviews in qualitative research are semi-structured where an interview guide provides specific questions but allows for follow up questions that clarify information or probe the participant for more information (Stake, 1995). Merriam (1998) suggests that qualitative studies utilize semi-structured interviews, because the tool allows researchers, especially inexperienced ones, a guide and focus to the interview, yet flexibility to probe for understanding with the participants.

Semi-structured interviews were completed for the administrators participating in this study. The principal was interviewed longer than the assistant principal to gain a full understanding and history of the school. A ninety-minute interview with the principal took place during the initial phase of data gathering. The assistant principal and teachers participated in an
interview approximately fifty-seventy minutes long. One interview at the end of data collection was thirty-five minutes due to the participant having an unexpected team meeting. The interview questions were all completed, and any follow-up questions were done via email. An interview guide for the semi-structured interviews was developed based upon ideas from other qualitative researchers. Researchers (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) recommended that the interview guide begins by requesting information that described the phenomenon historically, activities, and experiences. Merriam (1998) described how questions pertaining to the participants’ feelings and opinions gathered information around values, culture, and emotions. These types of questions and historical understanding helped to answer the research questions for this study and understand the complexity of implementing the RTI framework over time.

An interview guide or protocol (Appendix D) for the semi-structured interviews was developed based upon the researcher’s best practices (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The type of interview guide, as recommended by researchers Kvale & Brinkmann (2009), addressed some of the study’s themes, such as collaboration and culture. I had prepared a limited number of questions for the interviews and additionally asked follow-up questions during the interview session, as recommended by Rubin and Rubin (2012). As recommended by several researchers (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009; Arther & Nazroo, 2003), I piloted the interview questions. I piloted them with two retired educators, one administrator and another a teacher.

For this study, the questions focused on participants’ perceptions of whether and how RTI implementation changed the school, and RTI’s impact academically and socially on students and staff. Changes in special education processes and support of at-risk learners, such as ELLs, were probed. The interview guide started with questions that pertain to general facts about the
case and expertise with the RTI. Questions led to discussing the participants’ feelings and experiences about the changes in RTI implementation generated. The questions explored the participants’ perspectives on RTI’s implementation and changes to teaching practices, leadership, and school culture.

Each participant was given a blank interview protocol. The participant was assigned a pseudonym by the researcher on the first day of data collection during professional development. Other personal information requested was completed during the interview and survey (Appendix J), such as educational role, educational level of the participant, special certifications, school leadership role, years implementing RTI, years implementing RTI at case site, gender, and age.

When the interview began, I reviewed the informed consent with each participant to ensure she or he still wanted to participate in the study. Audio recordings by two devices recorded the interviews. The interview questions generated rich, descriptive narratives that helped to demonstrate the complexity of the study (Maxwell, 2005). I took notes during the interview process, and field notes were drafted after the sessions were complete, because this practice was recommended by other qualitative researchers (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). The field notes delved into questions, concerns, and decisions that affected the study. Field notes were written after semi-structured interviews, focus group interviews, observations and when other data was gathered and analyzed, such as documents.

Semi-structured interviews took place at the elementary school. In keeping with the qualitative tradition, the relationship developed between the participants and the researcher was balanced through the development of “trust, intimacy, and reciprocity” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 84). Participants were selected and interviewed until saturation occurred (Creswell, 2013; Merriam,
When gathering data, saturation materialized once participants provided no new information that furthers the understanding of the case (Seidman, 2006).

**Focus Group Interviews**

Teacher’s perceptions toward the education reform manifest within their opinions, perceptions, impressions, feelings, and experiences with the reform (Flores & Alonso, 1995). Focus group interviews provide a positive means for a researcher to gather information (Creswell, 2009; Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1996). History, opinions, social issues, and cultural issues may be uncovered through focus group interviews (Kitzinger, 1995). Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest that focus group interviews present “a group of individuals representative of the population whose ideas are of interest” (p. 30).

Due to the use of the sampling matrix for the focus group participants, a diverse group of participants was sought. The method of using focus groups supported the study by exploring the participants’ perceptions, experiences, and knowledge of RTI. Focus groups helped to talk about taboo topics, such as culture because members support each other into sharing feelings and experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Focus groups and group interviews were often used in conjunction with individual, in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2013; Morgan, 1996). Together, they provided me with the opportunity to gather a range of perspectives and learn about the participants’ experiences. These opinions, perceptions, and feelings shaped the experience of others that may be expressed through a group discussion (Flores & Alonso, 1995). It also provided an opportunity to gain in-depth information. Focus groups remained “advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information when the time to collect information is limited, and when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other when individuals interviewed one-on-one may be hesitant to provide information” (Creswell,
Interpersonal communication was important in focus groups because it highlighted the cultural values and group norms (Kitzinger, 1995); interpersonal interactions during the focus group sessions were noted.

At the beginning of the focus group, I reviewed the informed consent with the participants. A pseudonym was assigned to each teacher and administrator from the first professional development day. I used these pseudonyms for participants that volunteered to be interviewed. The following participant information was requested: educational role, educational level of the participant, special certifications, school leadership role, years implementing RTI, years implementing RTI at the case site, gender, and age. When the interview began, I reviewed the informed consent with each participant to ensure he or she still wanted to participate in the study. Audio recordings by two devices recorded the interviews.

In focus group interviews, the researcher cannot control the confidentiality of participants (Flores & Alonso, 1995; Kitzinger, 1995). Therefore, I emphasized that the information remain confidential. Analysis of focus group interviews was similar to other qualitative reported data (Kitzinger, 1995). Kitzinger (1995) and Maxwell (2005) recommended examining dissenting opinions. During the focus group for the study, general opinions and dissenting voices were noted along with group dynamics and interactions of members.

Focus group interviews were conducted with one group of teachers. These interviews asked teachers to: 1) describe their perception of the biggest changes due to full RTI implementation, 2) reflect on how the RTI implementation was implemented, 3) discuss how RTI implementation impacted and changed their teaching practices and instruction, 4) and discuss how implementation impacted learning practices or collaboration in the classroom and school. To gather some of this data, the participants first engaged in an opening storytelling
activity by writing their reflections on chart paper. Participants wrote on chart paper thoughts and reflections based upon these global areas of implementation. This storytelling activity highlighted challenges, obstacles, best practices, impact in school, impact on teaching practices, impact on leadership, and significant changes due to RTI implementation. Chart paper with each of the words allowed for participants to note and write comments in these defined areas. These charts were kept and stored. The chart papers were electronically archived by creating a picture of them. Each piece of paper was analyzed as a data piece of data for the study.

A focus group interview guide (Appendix E and Appendix K) is constructed based on effective research practices (Creswell, 2013; Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006). Focus group questions should start general to specific and lead with questions of the most significance and importance to the research (Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006). For this study, the focus group questions correlate to the research questions for this study, particularly around leadership, school culture, and teaching practices.

Based upon this best practice, the focus group questions for this study were “ordered based upon their relative importance on the research agenda” (Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006, p. 349). In keeping with the qualitative tradition and focus group analysis (Flores & Alonso, 1995), direct quotations were used to illustrate the themes and results gathered from the focus groups. With proper procedures and design for the focus group questions (Morgan, 1996), I obtained the desired information that answered the study’s research questions. I monitored the group participants’ interactions (Creswell, 2013; Flores & Alonso, 1995; Morgan, 1996). Interactions among participants in a focus group contributed to responses by expanding and developing each other’s ideas and influences (Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006). The participants’ interactions were a useful piece of data for this study. This study had two participants in the focus group. The hidden
advantage to focus groups was that the group dynamics often empower group members to share and discuss important topics by giving a voice and room to shape their ideas and share perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Shoaf & Shoaf, 2006). The focus group met for fifty minutes before school in the elementary school’s conference room. The demographic information was collected in the first meeting, while the interview questions and protocol were completed in a second session due to one participant being called to the principal’s office during the first session. For this study, focus groups engaged in providing a safe space, structure and open dialogue on the changes brought on by the implementation of the RTI framework over time.

Morgan (1996) states the researcher needs to ensure that proper facilitation takes place so that the gathered information from the participants remains relevant to the research. One concern about this form of interviewing is that “group norms may silence individual voices of dissent” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 300). Group discussions may present more critical comments than an individual may share interviews one-on-one because the group mentality makes it safe to share and encourages members to do as well (Kitzinger, 1995).

In this study, the nature of sharing in a group encouraged contributions from both participants. Minority opinions were examples that were important to note and consider in the research study (Kitzinger, 1995; Maxwell, 2005). Field notes, the chart paper, and transcriptions of the interview with pseudonyms were used for data analysis.

Observations

For this study, observations took place in a natural setting of an elementary school and were used in conjunction with other data gathering techniques to triangulate analysis and draw conclusions based upon the research questions. Merriam (1998) recommended that “observations are also conducted to triangulate emerging findings; that is, they are used in conjunction with
interviewing and document analysis to substantiate the findings” (p. 96). An observation protocol was used to document these events (Appendix L). These observations provided a firsthand encounter that seeks to explore the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). Observations conducted in the natural setting helped to triangulate a study’s findings (Bassey, 1999; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Tight, 2010). For this study, I observed in the school setting to which allowed me to triangulate findings in conjunction with interviews and other artifacts. I observed two professional development meetings with teachers, three Collaborative Teacher Teams (CTTs) meetings with one or multiple grade levels, one RTI coordinator’s meeting, one-grade level placement, and four SAT meetings. One professional development session with the instructional coach was observed to see how curricular, professional development and coaching support the teachers in their efforts to meet the needs of all students effectively. Four student Assistance Team (SAT) meetings were observed to see how teams work with parents on developing and implementing Tier 2 academic and social supports. To maintain the confidentiality of staff and students, I did not collect teacher, student, or parent names during the observations, except in one situation; a parent signed informed consent for observation parent form (Appendix I). To attend one particular SAT meeting, a parent wrote the child’s name on the form and signed their own name on the form, granting me permission to observe and attend the SAT meeting. The parents did not attend the other three observed meetings. Field notes were written after observations for the purpose of reflecting on the observed events and be used in data analysis.

Documents

Merriam (1998) describes the importance of personal documents and states explicitly that “personal documents are a reliable source of data concerning a person’s attitudes, beliefs, and
view of the world” (p. 116). Most case studies examine some newspapers, reports, minutes of meetings, and school documents that may pertain to the phenomenon (Stake, 1995).

For this study, the reviewed documents were RTI documents, such as the district school intervention guidelines, RTI and SAT training documents, and a schoolmaster schedule. I requested in writing to the district office, curriculum and instruction office, and the school principal to share documents that may be useful for this study (Appendix M). Documents that were accessed did not have students’ and teachers’ names to ensure the confidentiality of subjects.

When reviewing documents, the researcher needs to consider the context in which the document was written and determine its’ relevance to the purpose and questions of the study (Bowen, 2009). During the initial reading of the documents, I assessed relevant passages and text that provided insights and understanding of the case study’s questions. A line by line analysis was done in conjunction with the initial search for relevant connections to RTI implementation, leadership, collaboration, and teaching practices.

Field Notes

After completing an observation or interview, a field note had to be written as soon as possible to ensure the accuracy and capture the data gathered (Antwi & Hamza, 2015). For this study, this written account of the observation was written with two components. First, a descriptive picture of the setting, actions, and conversations was provided. Second, a reflective account was included the researcher’s thoughts on the observations, ideas from the conversation or possible follow up questions. The field note was used as a part of the data analysis.
Summary

The methods for this qualitative case studies collect data from the organization and participants in the study. Collecting data with a variety of methods from within the case helps identify patterns within the data analysis (Bassey, 1999). These methods of data gathering provide multiple ways to answer the research questions of the study and grew the understanding or etic of the study.

Data Analysis

Data gathered through the sampling process is analyzed to gain understanding into the case site’s experiences with RTI implementation, specifically at the stage where the change process refreezes or institutionalizes new norms and practices in place. Data analysis is “the process of making sense out of the data. And making sense out of data involves consolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read—it is the process of making meaning” (Merriam, 1998, p. 178). Analysis of educator’s perceptions of RTI implementation at this case site and how RTI changed processes and practices in a K – 5 urban elementary schools were viewed through multiple data sources. “The key objective of qualitative analysis is to identify conceptual similarities/differences and to discover types, classes, sequences, processes, patterns or wholes” (Baskarada, 2014, p. 15).

Some of the data was gathered through individual interviews and a focus group, which were audio-recorded. They were transcribed verbatim to ensure the accuracy of the analysis. I had requested that the transcription service at Rev.com sign my letter of confidentiality that names and information contained on the audio recordings were not be shared or disseminated in any fashion (Appendix H). The representative Chief Financial Officer (CFO) stated that they did not have individual transcribers sign a confidentiality form. Instead, the CFO of Rev.com and I
signed a client non-disclosure agreement between his company Rev.com and myself, where the company ensured “Rev.com will keep secret and will not disclose to anyone any of the Confidential Information.” Observations in the school setting and key documents, such as the SAT documents adopted by the district, were analyzed and coded for patterns.

While transcribing interviews and collecting documents, field notes, and other pertinent artifacts, I employed a general inductive or interpretative approach to analyze the information, as suggested by many qualitative researchers (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Thomas, 2006). Thomas (2006) suggested that the general approach enabled the researcher with a convenient and efficient way to derive information and findings from focused questions and interviews. Thomas (2003) described how there were several reasons to use an inductive approach. First, I wanted to summarize and condense text data. Second, I wanted to establish clear links from the data to the summarized findings and research objective. Third, I provided a framework, either by theory or model, which structured the data.

Educational and organizational change theory, in addition to RTI research, was used to guide analytical data analysis. Figure 7 illustrates the analytical approach I took for this study.

![Figure 7. Levels of Analytical Analysis Adapted from Miles & Huberman (1994)](image)

Figure 7 was adapted from Miles & Huberman (1994) to show a progression of analytical analysis used in this qualitative case study. In level 1, raw data were examined and summarized to help establish codes connected to the study. At this level, patterns showed similarities,
differences, sequence, frequency, correspondence, and causation that were used to code the data, which is recommended by other researchers (Creswell, 2013; Saldana, 2009). The result of the inductive analysis developed overarching themes from the data (Creswell, 2009). Figure 7 represented these themes, relationships, and patterns as level 2. Not all the data gathered was used nor did it fit into the major themes, as noted by Stake (1995). In the written case study, the researcher provided a detailed description of the setting or individuals prior to presenting the major themes (Creswell, 2013). During the last stage of the analysis presented in chapter 5, connections to the literature and the case study’s research questions and themes were detailed.

Through the inductive analysis approach, I did not generate predetermined labels or codes for the study. Data analysis, such as coding, was recommended to occur simultaneously to data collection and gathering for case methods (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). Both data gathering and analysis were completed concurrently in this study. I coded information during data gathering, while interpretively and constantly cross-examining across the data for common labels and codes to establish patterns. To proceed through the inductive process, several approaches were used during data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Tight, 2010). First, a constant comparative method was used as an inductive approach that was one of the leading methods of qualitative data analysis (Baskarada, 2014; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). Constant comparative method was used during the data analysis process for this study because the constant comparative method focused on the cross-examination of data by looking at each piece of data and re-coding till categories and themes were determined. Second, analytical memos had documented an audit trail for how decisions around data analysis were made. Analytical memos were used as a means to illustrate the decision-making process of how categorical and themes were developed (Corbin & Strauss,
2008; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). Descriptions of coding, constant comparative method, and category generation are presented in the following sections. Table 10 visualized the general inductive process described above and undertake for this study.

Table 10

*General Inductive Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>An initial close reading of raw text conducted</th>
<th>Specific text segments related to research questions; identified</th>
<th>Text segments coded to create categories; code-book created</th>
<th>Redundancy and overlap among categories reduced; create a synthesis of categories</th>
<th>Themes developed by categories; descriptive narrative presented for context</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Constant Comparison

Open Coding ← Axial Coding

Analytical Memos

Multiple pages of raw text | Multiple segments of text | Multiple categories | Reduced categories | Identified themes |


**Data Analysis Process**

In this section on the data analysis process, I explain how the study coded the data gathered through open coding and axial coding. During the data analysis, constant comparison and categorical construction delve into the development of key categories and themes; how the study approaches category and theme development presents under constant comparison and categorical construction. Finally, the purpose of analytical memos describes tools uses in the
study prior to analysis. As a case narrative answers the first research question, I explain how it is used in the study to describe RTI implementation efforts.

Coding is a word or phrase that summarizes or represents meaning from data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). For this study, the coding process involves two cycles of coding; the first cycle is open coding, and the second cycle is axial coding. In the data analysis progress, it is important to recognize “knowing what leads to significant understanding, recognizing good sources of data, and consciously and unconsciously testing out the veracity of their eyes and robustness of their interpretations. It requires sensitivity and skepticism” (Stake, 1995, p. 50).

To determine themes and recognize good sources of data that lead to etic or understanding of the study’s research questions, the constant comparative process was used throughout the data gathering process. The constant comparative process was explained more thoroughly later in this section. While analyzing the data, codes were created in NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. Each code or phrase used in the analysis was detailed within the program, an explanation of the code in relation to the study, and an example from the data that represents the coded word or phrase (Saldana, 2013).

**Open Coding**

Open coding involves breaking apart and analyzing the raw data for the major or essential categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013). Codes developed in this phase build from the ground up toward categories. The process generates text and segments of text connected to a list of codes across the set of data (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013).
During the initial data collection or first cycle (Saldana, 2013), I reviewed and labeled interviews and documents line by line. I broke apart the raw data with codes that generate concepts and segmented data. Constant comparison of data collection to emerging codes, concepts, and categories supported the data analysis process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998). I continuously reviewed the codes, concepts, and categories from the raw data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Using both NVivo and descriptive techniques, key information from participants as well as source documents, field notes, and observations were used to derive salient codes (Saldana, 2009). According to Creswell (2013) and Saldana (2009), Nvivo Coding is appropriate for novice qualitative researchers. This technique uses words and short phrases from the actual recorded data from the participants so that the coded data is in their words.

An example of Nvivo coding in the current study was the use of the term: SAT documentation. Whenever this terminology was used, it was connected to the paperwork, assessments, or notes used for reporting on student performance and progress. The use of Nvivo Coding for the transcribed interviews helped ensure the researcher’s interpretation was grounded in the direct wording of the participants. When using descriptive coding, the researcher coded or labeled the text with one word (often a noun) that encompassed the idea in the text (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2009). One example was the use of the word, ‘enrichment’ which was used to describe the time when students moved classrooms and received Tier 1b, Tier 2, or Tier 3 intervention. This term was chosen by participants as they wished to convey their perception of this time as an opportunity for all students to grow rather than only those who require remediation.
Other coding approaches were necessary at this first cycle of analysis. Structural Coding was used to label and index topics that helped outline key ideas from interview transcripts (Saldana, 2009). Using NVivo, I examined transcripts for patterns related to the frequency of common words used by participants. I sorted the data by administrators and teachers, and then by the subcategories of general education teachers, special education teachers, a newer and veteran teacher looking for keywords. Additionally, value coding was employed as another technique to identify participants' values and beliefs (Saldana, 2009). One example of a value that emerged from this analysis was the importance of all teachers having ownership of the learning outcomes of all students.

By using a variety of coding strategies, I determined patterns in the data in relation to how the organization changed. Both substantive and theoretical categories were developed through the coding process (Maxwell, 2005). NVivo, descriptive, and the other mentioned codes developed substantive categories through the direct words (Saldana, 2009) or context of the data by summarizing significant segments of data, which was recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Corbin and Strauss (2008).

**Axial Coding**

Axial coding involves “relating concepts to each other” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 195) to develop emerging themes, categories, and subcategories. Stake (1995) recommends addressing data analysis through the establishment of patterns, the categorical number of instances, and direct interpretation.

During the second cycle of coding (Saldana, 2013), I used Pattern Coding to summarize groups of themes into a superordinate category, which can sometimes be more abstract than their individual theme components (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, teachers described how
their instructional practices changed to meet the needs of each student. Codes associated with this change included: differentiated core instruction, targeted interventions, meeting the range of learners, and individualizing through technology to support students. These sub-codes were then summarized into the theme of individualizing instruction.

A direct interpretation was also employed during data analysis. Stake(1995) suggested that the importance of one single instance or response by a participant may be extremely relevant to answering the research questions. An example was noted by a general education teacher who explained how RTI greatly affected internal accountability across school-based teams, teachers, and administration. She explained that internal accountability changed the school culture by administration’s enforcing and establishing new expectations for teachers implementing RTI-related processes, supplanting the extreme emphasis and administration’s hyper-focus on external high-stakes assessments, and became part of a theme where the leadership enforced accountability for RTI processes.

Through these data analyses, I was able to identify the key themes of my research. The descriptive narratives from participants generated the major themes within the study’s findings, which is as recommended by Creswell (2009). Essentially, participants and other pieces of data from the sample provided an understanding of how RTI has been implemented and sustained. Based on all this analysis, the most relevant themes were identified in this study.

**Constant Comparison and Categorical Construction**

Constant comparison is the comparison of data for similarities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Constant comparison is a data analysis technique in qualitative studies and established in the grounded theory tradition (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998).
Constant comparison was utilized in this study throughout the data analysis process, from the first collected piece of data until the themes were constructed. In the constant comparison process, “hermeneutic interpretations may be derived by iteratively changing focus between the whole and its parts” (Baskarada, 2014, p. 15). By looking at different parts and patterns within the data, I essentially built concepts toward categories or themes that became more abstract ideas within the case. I hoped to discover and understand the experience of the participants by breaking apart the raw data into concepts and eventually categorizes them. The finding of the development of a culture of supportive evolved through the constant comparison of teachers’ and administrators’ transcripts. For example, the code “administration’s leadership” recognized the principal and assistant principals’ actions and beliefs that they viewed their role as leaders to directly support teachers during implementation. The code “teacher’s view” of leadership showed that teachers experienced administration as key supporters of them during RTI. Teachers working together in new collaborative ways were noted through codes on the “new SAT structure.” Last, codes on “district support” reflected how teachers utilized outside school-level support to implement RTI and cultivate levels of support during RTI implementation. As I compared across the data, these codes became the more abstract idea of the development of a culture of support.

Through the constant comparative analysis, categorizes, and themes, developed from patterns in the data, answered the research questions of the study (Merriam, 1998). As concepts were developed into categories and themes, the case’s findings were generalized to the literature to explain some of the findings or present different theories (Maxwell, 2005). These findings were presented as categorizes or themes; participants’ quotations were used to ground the
findings in the data. These naturalistic generalizations from the study were noted to other cases or practitioners, who may learn from this research (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995).

In developing categories, Merriam (1998, 2009) outlines aspects to category construction that are used in this study. Specifically, the categories, according to Merriam, “should reflect the purpose of the research” (1998, p. 183). During data analysis, constructed categories are responsive to the purpose of the research. Essentially, the developed categories answer the research questions of the study. Merriam (1998; 2009) suggests that the categories encompass all the important data utilized to answer the research questions; these constructed categories must be exhaustive to all relevant data.

Categories did not overlap in any manner, as they remained mutually exclusive. Each piece of relevant data was only included in one category. The category was abstract enough to fit in the most important data that was relevant to answering the research questions. While Merriam (1998; 2009) described the name of the category encompasses many pieces of data, the category’s name must be sensitive enough to encompass the data clearly. A short phrase, such as leadership challenges and obstacles, maybe better than leadership on its own. Last, the data in a category remained congruent, where the concepts or segments of data fit together within the described and labeled category. Congruency across the categories was also necessary where apples and oranges may be subcategories of the main category labeled fruit in the fresh drawer.

Case Narrative

A case narrative was developed in order to capture the rich story of RTI implementation because the creation of categories and themes for the first research question did not materialize. Participants were able to describe what happened but had a harder time remembering earlier
aspects of implementation. Instead, phases of implementation chronologically were used to
described RTI implementation efforts by teachers and administrators at the case site.

**Analytical Memos**

Analytical memos documented and described the data analysis process, such as the
decision-making process for determining good sources of data and themes (Corbin & Strauss,
2008; Creswell, 2013). “Memos are research notes that may contain interpretations of patterns
found in the data, or general comments on issues revealed during the analysis, which can be
coded in a similar way to interview transcripts” (Baskarada (2014, p. 17). These memos were
longer in length than a field note and usually written off-site after interviews and observations
were completed. For this study, the analytical memo examined the events from the day from my
perspective. For example, when I rearranged codes into categories and themes, I saw across
transcripts “instructional changes” that evolved from “teaching shifting away from teacher-
directed learning and teaching to the middle. The instructional practices of teachers now moved
toward individualized learning. Teachers were learning targeted intervention and incorporating
technology that supports individualized learning needs of students,” which eventually became
the finding of individualizing instruction. The analytical memos helped create an audit trail for
the study.

**Analysis Tools**

A computer qualitative analysis software program, NVivo, was used to code and store
data. The data was triangulated across the in-depth interviews, focus groups, and coding of
documents (Creswell, 2009; Tight, 2010). Themes within the data were analyzed and eventually
collapsed into general themes that were used for interpretations when cross-analysis took place.
After transcription of interviews, access to the data was limited to me. Merriam (1998)
recommends limited access to others to maintain the confidentiality of the data. The collected data was secured by passcodes on the computer, and loose papers remain locked in a file drawer in the researcher’s home; researchers (Bassey, 1999; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998) suggest this strategy for security reasons.

In summary, the data analysis process for this qualitative case study embraced an inductive approach that was focused on uncovering the themes and categories. These themes and categories were grounded in the detail process with procedures that guided the study to findings that presented meaningful descriptions that highlighted the categories and themes uncovered through the course of the data analysis. I hoped to uncover an analytical story of how RTI implementation impacted an urban elementary school. The next section discusses how this study addressed the areas of trustworthiness, transferability, validity, and reliability.

**Trustworthiness, Validity, Reliability, and Transferability**

Trustworthiness addresses the study’s validity, reliability, and credibility (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009; Merriam, 1998). Ethical considerations also affect a study’s trustworthiness (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995). “Qualitative researchers need to respond to the concerns of outsiders, many of whom may be unfamiliar with or blatantly challenging of the credibility of qualitative research” (Merriam, 1998, p. 201). In this section, I explain how this study sought to address trustworthiness issues.

The internal validity of a study, as defined by Merriam (1998), describes the extent to which research findings were congruent with reality. Similarly, validity in a study explains, “whether a method investigates what it purports to investigate” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 246). An audit trail describing the process for data gathering and analysis supports a study’s
external validity (Flick, 2009; Merriam, 1998). Yin (2009) states to develop a chain of evidence, but it is essentially the same idea.

To address the study’s internal validity, I utilized the following strategies: triangulation of data, member checking participant’s interpretation of observations or interviews, extended time in the natural setting of the study, and I noted my own research biases and history with the district and RTI implementation. An audit trail was completed for this study. Aspects of the study have been detailed throughout data collection and analysis. Transcripts, field notes, observation notes, memos, and data collection stops with an advisor, and multiple drafted interpretive themes detailed the evolution of the study to the eventual findings and conclusions.

Reliability is explained as to how consistent the findings appear with the presented study and whether the findings could be replicated by another researcher (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998)). To be reliable, “the qualitative study provides the reader with a depiction in enough detail to show that the author’s conclusion ‘makes sense’” (Merriam, 1998, p. 199). The use of triangulating data and an audit trail that lead to reasonable findings address reliability concerns (Merriam, 1998).

This study addressed issues pertaining to reliability by ensuring the underlying approach in the study remained clear and transparent. Furthermore, I described how the study was conducted and how conclusions were achieved throughout the data analysis process. Additionally, rich descriptions were used in this study. These rich descriptions were connected to research questions; also, they provided direct connects to the raw data and improve the reliability of the study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995).

Stake (1995) also describes the ethical obligations of qualitative researchers that are “to minimize misrepresentation and misunderstanding” (p. 109), which helps support the study’s
credibility. In these written responses, the researcher should ensure the substance of what was observed or discussed remains accurate (Merriam, 1998). To maintain accuracy for interviews in this study, participants affirm findings of the study through a member checking document that presented themes and findings, definitions, and representative quotes from selected participants. Merriam (1998) also suggests writing analytical memos and field notes as soon as possible to ensure the data captured and not misinterpreted due to time. Therefore, field notes are written as soon as possible after observations to lessen the chance of misinterpreting or forgetting what was observed.

A clear chain of evidence supported my ability to draw meaningful conclusions in the study (Merriam, 1998). Peer debriefings were a process for this researcher to discuss how the analysis was progressing in the study with a peer (Flick, 2009). For this study, I discussed my thoughts and actions taken during data gathering and data analysis with the principle investigator Dr. Bennett. These conversations were confidential and supported the accuracy of the study’s final conclusions. By utilizing an audit trail that created a chain of evidence, I addressed credibility concerns about how decisions during data analysis and findings were determined. In the study, I searched for disproving evidence that could lead to a reduction in confirmation bias and maintained a chain of evidence. These actions allowed for stronger justifications of any conclusions at the end of the study.

This qualitative case study sought to understand RTI implementation in a school setting. These results may not be replicated by another researcher in another site, because the qualitative tradition expects each participant and researcher to have his or her own experience. These experiences change over time. In quantitative research, replication of results is expected and part of the validity of the tradition and a quantitative study. While the study could be replicated in
process and procedures, the data collected from the participants and the impact of the researcher on the study was unique to that point in time and in that natural setting. Some of the findings may be similar, but the goal of qualitative studies is to bring about new understanding from these participants’ points of view and journey, not transferability.

Due to the continuation of education reform, building staff at the elementary level have been leading efforts to improve academic and social instruction and interventions for all students. Schools were still developing their RTI framework to meet all student needs. Scheduling and resource allocation were necessary tasks that principals and teachers needed to revisit as they approached meeting the needs of all their students. This study, while it may not necessarily be transferable to another setting, demonstrated the challenges and success of this type of change. The lessons learned from their experience may inform other professionals in their efforts to meet the needs of their students better.

Triangulation, rich descriptions, member checking, and audit trail supported the validity and reliability of a research study and are discussed more thoroughly in the following section in order to address trustworthiness, validity, and reliability concerns for this study.

**Triangulation**

In this study, I observed the natural setting, analyzed documents, and interviewed to gain participants’ perceptions of RTI implementation and sustainability. Creswell (2013) supports the examination of multiple and different sources to triangulate the sample. The multiple interviews, observations, and document analysis made up of a diverse group of professionals and processes that were analyzed. For this study, I converged the multiple measures of evidence to understand better RTI and the changes brought to it in a bounded case. Triangulations among the collected data enabled the researcher to analyze data sources and coding for themes. Merriam (1998) suggested for triangulation that a researcher puts forth and clarifies any researcher bias. I articulated any distinct views and opinions from my educational experiences, especially about the particular site, because of the past relationship through employment with the school district.

**Rich and Thick Descriptions**

Rich-thick descriptions provided the written details that demonstrate the content and meaning that arise from the various forms of data collected (Bassey, 1999; Creswell, 2009; Maxwell, 2005; Stake, 1995). After careful analysis, rich, detailed accounts and the narratives story provided useful information. Rival theories were stated in the collected data. This data determined if there was supporting evidence for the theory or if a needed for further research in this area was warranted. To ground the research in the raw data collected, I ensured that the rich and thick descriptions incorporated useful quotations that depicted the finds and categories.

**Member Checking**

In using member checking, the participants reviewed the material for accuracy and approved the inclusion of it in the research (Bassey, 1999; Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995). In this study, participants checked the findings that answered the research questions. Maxwell (2005) strongly encouraged researchers to utilize member checking during their research because he felt
that it assured the validity and trustworthiness of the data. I used member checking to check for the accuracy of the findings and provided the participants with the opportunity to acknowledge the information gathered to be included in the research study. I shared interpretations, selected quotes, site implementation timeline, and phases of implementation with the participants through email, and those who did not respond back received follow up emails and phone calls. An example of participant feedback was, “I have read through the documents, it looks good to me. I have attached the participant feedback with my responses.” In the participant feedback form, the participated noted agreement to the identified themes and provided additional points for the researcher to consider like “agree; however, limitations have been placed on schools based upon funding issues.” With twelve participants responding positively to my interpretations, selected quotes, site implementation timeline, and phases of implementation, I was comfortable moving toward category development and in portraying the participants’ perspectives. Misinterpretations of the information gathered, and researcher biases were minimized or eliminated due to the participants’ validation.

**Audit Trail**

Merriam (1998) explains that the researcher must create an audit trail that details “how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry” of the study (p. 207). As information is gathered, recorded and interpreted, a chain of evidence begins to shape the study (Yin, 2009). The ability to search for disproving evidence may lead to a reduction in confirmation bias, and maintaining a chain of evidence allows for stronger justifications of any conclusions. A clear chain of evidence was necessary to ensure the reliability of the study.
Analytical memos addressed issues pertaining to researcher bias and interpretive findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Flick, 2009; Maxwell, 2005; Merriam, 1998). Through analytical memos, I reflected upon my own biases and concerns during data gathering and data analysis. I shared my code lists, transcriptions of interviews, analytical memos, and data analysis with my faculty advisor, who was leading this research. Through this solicited feedback, I cross-checked with her in regard to any other alternative approaches or conclusions that may be relevant to the study that I may have overlooked.

In summary, I proposed several actions to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative case study on RTI. Essentially, ethical considerations, triangulation, member checking, and an audit trail supported the validity and credibility of the study.

**Limitations**

While case studies tend to be holistic in their thick description, the case remains only a partial view of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 1998). Simons (1996) explains that the case study builds an understanding of a complex case in particular contents. A disadvantage of case study research is the difficulty generalizing across cases or from a single case (Simons, 1996). Critics within the academic community note that this form of research lacks rigor and scientific generalization (Bassey, 1999; Neale, Thapa, & Boyce, 2006). Additionally, critics find the case study to be overly detailed and lengthy, that results in a massive document that is unreadable (Creswell, 2009; Neale et al. 2006).

Another limitation is the sample size available for the study. The results may not be generalizable beyond the specific population from which the sample was drawn. Due to the length of the study and time commitment for participants, some respondents may be unavailable or unwilling to participate in the interviews or focus groups (Neale et al., 2006). The case study
research also impacts the lives of other professionals and may provide a distorted view of the case (Bassey, 1999). A researcher may overextend or exaggerate their findings in case studies due to the sample size (Merriam, 1998).

I needed to be transparent about any biases that may affect the study, as recommended by numerous researchers (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2009; Merriam, 1998; Tight, 2010). I worked with the teachers and administration on the implementation of some aspects of RTI changes in another school in the district but did not work in the school. I am no longer employed in the school district and have no continuing influence in the school since my departure over two years ago.

**Chapter Summary**

The interpretive paradigm and qualitative tradition matched the philosophy and approach for this study. The case study methods entailed viewing the elementary school from multiple data points, with the researcher being the primary resource for data gathering. The data gathering process sought to uncover insights into the RTI implementation. The protection of participants remained a focus throughout the study. Through two cycles of coding, data analysis engaged in a process where the raw data was taken apart into meaningful segments and put back together into new categories and themes. Trustworthy concerns for this type of study were addressed by utilizing a variety of strategies, such as triangulation of the data and rich-thick descriptions that grounded the findings into the data gathered. With ethical considerations also addressed in the study, the combination of trustworthiness strategies ensured the credibility and validity of the finding in the study.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the impact of the implementation of a multi-tiered RTI system in an urban elementary school in New Mexico. This research provided a more advanced view of RTI implementation. The following research questions reflect these implementation issues:

1. How did an urban elementary school in New Mexico implement an integrated RTI model?

2. How did the implementation of the integrated model of RTI change teaching practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?

3. How did implementation of an integrated RTI framework change leadership practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?

A qualitative case study explored the lessons learned by focusing on teachers' and administrators’ professional perspectives on the implementation of an integrated RTI framework at an urban K-5 elementary school located in New Mexico. This research provided a more advanced view of RTI implementation as it looked at implementation beyond five years of implementation.

The data collected from the study was gathered through fourteen individual interviews, one focus group interview with two participants, observations of professional development meetings, grade-level meetings, Student Assistant Team (SAT) meetings, and collaborative teaching teams (CTTs), field notes, and documents. A process of constant comparison across interviews, field notes, observations, and documents developed the findings of the study.

The purpose of the chapter is to answer the research questions by presenting the major parts and themes of the study. The structure of the chapter flows from a brief description of the
study’s participants and a table of findings. The first research question is presented in its own section and answered in a narrative format without key themes; the narrative approach provides a case description and details how participants implemented RTI. The second and third research questions are answered in their own sections with identified themes. A section summary follows each research question. At the end of the chapter, a chapter summary of the findings is presented. The following section describes the participants of the study.

**Study Participants**

The participants’ descriptions below have been arranged in the order in which interviews were conducted. A teacher from each K – 5 grade level participated in interviews. A mix of general education and special education participants were sought and interviewed. Teachers in leadership roles, such as grade level chairs or SAT facilitators, participated in the study. Three male teachers, eleven female teachers, and two female administrators participated in the study. Participant Demographics in Table 11 note each participant’s pseudonym, role, gender, age, race, education, years on-site, and total public-school experience. Table 11 is a brief description of each participant.
Table 11

Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>On Site (Years)</th>
<th>Public School Experience (Years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amelia</td>
<td>Admin</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>26+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reginald</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>26+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabrielle</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
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<td>Multiple</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>20-25</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>10-15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
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<tr>
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<td>B.A.</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interview 1 – Amelia

In 2000, Amelia became the principal at Contigo Elementary School. In 1994, she became employed as an assistant principal of the school. Amelia started in education as an eighth and sixth-grade teacher in Texas; she taught there for two years before moving to New Mexico. She taught for four and a half years in a middle school in a different urban school district. After gaining her administrative license, Amelia became a staff developer for five years in the same district and filled in for an elementary assistant principal maternity leave prior to joining the staff of Contigo Elementary School. Over her 24 years at Contigo, she served on numerous task forces or committees. Presently, Amelia worked on the safety and security committee and the future-ready committee. On the latter committee, Amelia worked on the roll-out of Chromebooks into
the elementary schools, including the professional development, timeline, and tools needed in the schools to implement. She is a White female over 50 years of age who holds a master’s degree.

**Interview 2 – Reginald**

Reginald taught 18 years at Contigo Elementary School as the physical education teacher. In another urban district, he worked as an adaptive physical education teacher for 17 years. This work was in special education and provided alternative physical education for identified students. His job was itinerant, and he traveled to different schools K – 12. At Contigo Elementary School, Reginald served on numerous SAT teams. He was the grade-level chair for about six or seven years for the specials, Art, physical education, and Music. Reginald is a White male over 50 years of age who holds a master’s degree.

**Interview 3 – Emily**

Emily worked at Contigo Elementary School as a first-grade teacher and educational technology specialist. She has worked as the education technology specialist for the last two years but started at the school in 2010 as a first-grade teacher. Previously she taught kindergarten, second grade, fourth grade, fifth grade in a different school district. During her eight years at Contigo Elementary School, Emily served as a grade-level chair and member of the School Leadership Team (SLT). She also was an administrative intern at the school. She is a White female aged 30 – 39 with a master’s degree.

**Interview 4 – Georgia**

For the past 15 years, Georgia worked as the guidance counselor of Contigo Elementary School. She has taught in the school since 2007. She retired from working in Texas after 36 years and moved to New Mexico. In Texas, she taught five years of high school English, 14 years as a middle school counselor, 10 years as an elementary school counselor, and seven as
coordinator for student services for middle school and elementary counselors. At Contigo Elementary School, Georgia served as the 504 coordinator for several years and one year as a member of the new SAT team structure. Georgia is a White female over 50 years of age who has a master’s degree.

**Interview 5 – Gabrielle**

Gabrielle has worked at Contigo Elementary School for two years as a reading interventionist. At a different school in the district, she was a classroom teacher for kindergarten for five years and for first grade for six years. She has been a part of RTI ever since she started teaching 12 years ago. Gabrielle became an SAT facilitator in her previous school for several years. And when she began her career at Contigo Elementary School two years ago, she was asked to be the SAT coordinator. She revamped the system that the teachers and administrators use now. In her other public school experiences, Gabrielle taught both kindergartens for three years and first grade for five years. She has been a grade-level chair for both kindergarten and first-grade teams. As a grade level chair, she was a member of the school leadership team (SLT). At Contigo, she is an SAT coordinator and facilitates an SAT team. Gabrielle has an endorsement in reading and an endorsement in ESL. She is a White female between the ages of 40 – 49 years old who has a master’s degree.

**Interview 6 – Ana**

Ana has taught in Contigo Elementary School as a special educator for 17 years. Previously, she worked in a different district for seven and a half years. At Contigo, Ana has been a grade-level chair for special education for 14 of her 17 years, presently serving as grade-level chair. Her area of expertise is reading. She is Reading Recovery certified and has been trained on the following reading programs: Wilson Reading Program, Orton-Gillingham,
S.P.I.R.E., and Sound Sensible. Ana is a White female over 50 years of age who has a master’s degree.

**Interview 7 – Ivy**

Ivy is a second-grade teacher at Contigo Elementary School. She had taught here for 26 years, even when the school was part of a different district. Ivy has been the grade level chair for 25 years. Ivy has completed training on Common Core and the ReadyGen reading program. Ivy worked on numerous District committees that had to do with literacy. She was on the district’s committee on Common Core when the school implemented it and provided a teacher’s perspective on how to roll it out to the district and the elementary schools. She was on the committee that looked at standards when transitioning to standards-based instruction, which was before Common Core standards were implemented. Ivy is a White female over 50 years of age who has a master’s degree.

**Interview 8 – Dakota**

Dakota works at Contigo Elementary School as an instructional coach. She has been in this position for two years. She also is an SAT coordinator and facilitator. Dakota helped restructure, train, and support teachers on the new SAT process. She also served on both the reading and math committees, which organized academically focused family events. Previously, she taught fourth grade for 11 years in a school within the same district and was also a second-third grade inclusion teacher for one year at another school in the district. When she taught fourth grade, Dakota was the science chair and the STEM chair. Dakota had a STEM committee and held STEM events throughout the year; events were star night, science fair, science night, and math night. The school had an active engagement with parents. Dakota is a White female
between the ages of 40 – 49 years old who holds a master’s degree. She recently began her work on her doctoral degree from a local university.

**Interview 9 – Isla**

Isla has been a first-grade teacher for 25 years here at Contigo Elementary School. She fell in love with the grade level and just never had any desire ever to leave it. Isla has been a grade-level chair for several years and was part of the SLT when she was a grade-level chair. Isla had been an SAT chair for the lower grade level team, and right now, she chairs a committee called the Lighthouse Committee that looks to support opportunities for teacher and student empowerment, celebration, and improving school culture. She has worked closely with her committee and co-chair on the implementation of the *Seven Habits of Happy Kids* into the school. Isla is a White female between the ages of 40-49 years old who holds a master’s degree.

**Interview 10 – George**

George has worked as the Contigo’s Special Education Instructional Leader (SEIL) for two years. Previously, he had worked in other schools in the district as a seventh-grade special education teacher, SEIL, assistant principal, and principal at the elementary level. He currently serves on the SLT and Lighthouse committee. George closely monitors and works with SAT coordinators to ensure teachers feel supported in the RTI process. He is a white male over the age of 50 with an administrative license and a master’s degree.

**Interview 11 – Maggie**

Maggie has taught fourth grade for 18 years at Contigo Elementary School. Her experience prior to teaching at Contigo was in private schools. At Contigo, she has been SAT Chair for two years and served on the SAT committee for about 5 years. She also was a grade-level chair for 8 years. Maggie served on various committees, such as language arts curriculum,
math curriculum, social studies curriculum, presently serving as the Parent Teacher Organization liaison. She has been an SAT member on the new structure. Maggie is a White female over the age of 50 and has a bachelor’s degree.

**Focus Group Interview12 & 13– Victoria & Oliver**

For 14 years, Victoria has taught second grade or third grade at Contigo Elementary School. She was an SAT coordinator K – 5 for three years under the old SAT model. Victoria scheduled all the meetings, and did all the paperwork, while other facilitators ran the meetings with parents. Victoria took a leave of absence and came back to teach third grade. She became a grade-level chair for third grade the last couple of years and has worked with the SLT over that time. Victoria is a member of an SAT team. Victoria is a White female between the ages of 30 – 39 years and holds a master’s degree.

Oliver has been a fifth-grade teacher at Contigo Elementary School for 12 years. He worked at another school district for two years prior to his arrival. Oliver served as the grade level chair for the last three years and worked on the SLT while in this position. He is a member of an SAT team. He has been on various committees, usually focusing on safety and technology. Oliver is an Asian male between the ages of 40 – 49 years old with a bachelor’s degree.

**Interview 14 – Lucia**

Lucia has worked at Contigo for six years. When Lucia came to Contigo Elementary School, she taught first grade for two years. Lucia pursued an endorsement in gifted education and secured the teaching of the gifted position and has been teaching gifted students for four years. For the last two years, Lucia has been an SAT facilitator of the new SAT structure working with her team and families to support students receiving Tier 2 instruction. In Texas, her educational career began as a high school Spanish teacher, where she taught for five years in the
position. Then, Lucia taught third grade bilingual within a Spanish and English classroom. Lucia taught third-grade math and science and fourth-grade science solely. In terms of certifications, she is certified as a gifted teacher, in Art and TESOL. Lucia is a White female between the ages of 40 – 49 years and holds a master’s degree.

**Interview 15 – Ella**

Ella has been teaching as a kindergarten teacher for 13 years at Contigo Elementary School. She is currently the grade level chair and has worked with the SLT over that time. Ella has been on different committees. She oversaw the summer school prep and RTI program. It was an RTI program that was used during summer school. She was involved with a committee called Transition Team that was responsible for supporting teachers transition into Common Core. She helped transition teachers to use the new standards into curriculums and lessons. The committee looked at how all the standards and the frameworks looked at for each school in math and for ELA. She is also a member of an SAT team. She is trained in Orton-Gillingham. Ella is a White female between the ages of 30 – 39 years and holds a master’s degree.

**Interview 16 – Fiona**

Fiona has worked at Contigo Elementary School over two periods of time. She was hired as an assistant principal for five years in the year 2000 and then more recently came back for another five years in a variety of roles, including instructional coach, literacy processing specialist, and her present position as assistant principal. Fiona began teaching in 1982 at a small rural farming community in New Mexico. Due to having a family member in the military, she moved to a city in New Mexico and taught in a large urban district. Fiona stayed there 11 years, and in that 11 years, the school went through 12 administrators. Fiona started as a kindergarten teacher and went on to be a Title 1 reading teacher. She took on different roles like Title 1
coordinator and grade-level chair. She worked closely with the administration as they came in and left. Fiona became Contigo’s assistant principal in 2000 and remained in that role until she became an elementary principal at another school in the district. In 2012, she retired but decided to return to work as a teacher in Pueblo. She taught a combined third-fourth grade classroom because the whole school K-8 was about 38 students. In December of that year, one of the fifth-grade teachers resigned, so she became a three, four, five combined teacher. The next year, Fiona taught first grade with only 12 first graders. Fiona came back to Contigo Elementary School when she became the instructional coach. At the end of the year, the funding was shaky, so she decided to get her special education license. With her special education license, Fiona spent almost a year as the literacy processing specialist, working with special education students. In March of that year, the assistant principal left, and Fiona was asked to assume this role and finish the school year as an assistant principal. She has continued in this role. Fiona is a White female over 50 years of age and holds a master’s degree.

Findings

The Tiered Model Guiding RTI’s Implementation Processes

The RTI framework is based upon a public health model of intervention. The model addresses the general needs of a population and provides guidance for testing and interventions for individuals that have a greater need for resources and help. For the RTI framework, the key components describe a framework and process of tiered instruction and assessments to address students’ academic and social needs, which may support the determination of disability. As the student’s needs intensify, they move up in tiers, therefore becoming a smaller section of the population. Students move up and down the tiers as they need more or less direct and targeted
instruction. Figure 1 below illustrates the multi-tiered framework that includes academic and social systems.

![Response to Intervention Pyramid](image)

**Figure 1.** Response to Intervention Pyramid: Academic and Social Systems from National Association of State Directors of Special Education (2005)

The largest portion of the pyramid (at the bottom) comprises proficient students who are supported by the general curriculum. The middle portion of the pyramid includes students who need targeted instruction to address a skill deficit while still receiving the core curriculum in Tier 1. Progress monitoring takes place for students in the second tier to determine if the intervention and instruction are needed, or if a different intervention may be needed, or if Tier 3 instruction is necessary. The top tier of the pyramid, Tier 3, is a small percentage of students who need more intense and individualized instruction. These students also continue with the core curriculum found in Tier 1. Progress monitoring occurs at this level to determine the ongoing needs and whether the intervention is a good match for the student. Students are released from Tier 2 or Tier 3 when effective progress and proficiency has been achieved within the deficient skill areas. The percentages in Figure 1 are approximations that are flexible based upon the needs of the student population in the school. The suggested percentages are parameters that educators strive
for because it allows the system to function as effectively as possible, which reduces stress on available resources, because Tier 2 and Tier 3 require more resources, therefore limiting the number of student interventions at any single point in time.

**Review of Data Analysis**

The sixteen participants in the study shared their experiences on how an integrated Response to Intervention (RTI) model changed the teaching practices, leadership, and school culture in an urban elementary school in New Mexico. The semi-structured interviews of these sixteen participants, one focus group, documents, and field notes collected by the researcher explored professional background and experiences within an elementary school. Their shared experiences provided insight that described how RTI was implemented and the efficacy of the program. Observations of professional development meetings, grade-level meetings, Student Assistant Team (SAT) meetings, and collaborative teaching teams (CTTs) also contributed to the data collected and analyzed to provide a more complete understanding of how the RTI had been implemented and its efficacy for individualized student instruction.

The participants shared positive experiences and key insights on how RTI has improved communication and developed a culture of support. The data regarding the first research question provided a chronological narrative that described how the RTI program was implemented. The second research question identified three themes: (a) Individualized instruction; (b) Improved cooperation across stakeholders; (c) Leverage data analysis and progress monitoring to refine instruction. Three themes emerged from the data to answer the third research question: (a) Providing a unified vision for school improvement; (b) Developing a culture of support, and; (c) Restructuring personnel. The table 12 below provides a visual representation of how the emergent themes address each of the research questions. Table 12 visually represents the
findings of the study. The first research question is answered in a narrative format. The second research question identified three themes, and the third research question presented three themes as well.

Table 12

Summary of Findings

1. **How did an urban elementary school in New Mexico implement an integrated RTI model?**
   
   Case narrative describes chronologically the phases of implementation for an integrated RTI model by teachers and administrators in an urban elementary school.

2. **How did the implementation of the integrated model of RTI change teaching practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?**
   
   Individualizing instruction
   
   Improving cooperation across stakeholders
   
   Leveraging data analysis and progress monitoring to refine instruction

3. **How did implementation of an integrated RTI framework change leadership practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?**
   
   Providing a unified vision for school improvement
   
   Developing a culture of support
   
   Restructuring personnel

The next section describes through a narrative format the implementation process of RTI at the case site. The phases of implementation briefly capture the work done to implement an integrated RTI framework.

Phases of Implementation

This section detailed in narrative form how an urban elementary school in New Mexico implemented an integrated RTI model. The first research question, how did an urban elementary
school in New Mexico implement an integrated RTI model, was answered by detailing the implementation, rather than having themes. The narrative, which is similar to a case description, answered the research question by walking through the RTI implementation. Contigo Elementary School implemented Response to Intervention (RTI). The narrative, the chronological approach, includes information collected from participants’ interviews, observations, field notes, and documents. In this section, the four phases of implementation are outlined and described based on the collected evidence of the study.

RTI implementation was described by participants as phased in over time with several distinct phases. The four phases of implementation are: 1) social-emotional; 2) data-based decision making; 3) standards and curriculum; and 4) new RTI processes and procedures. The phases are described in this section, and Table 13 visually represents them. It is important to know that the phases do not necessarily mean an end to the effort in a phase. It means there was a shift of focus, but the work continued in that other area. For example, prioritizes changed as the new standards and curriculum were adopted, but data-based decision making continues through the phases. Table 13 below details the phases of Contigo’s RTI implementation.
Table 13

*Phases of Contigo’s RTI Implementation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase #</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Phase Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Phase 1</td>
<td>2004</td>
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<td>• Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) Three Rs: Being Respectful, Responsible, and Ready</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Second-Step</td>
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<td>Phase 2</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Data-based Decision Making</td>
<td>• Collaborative Teaching Teams (CTTs) focus on student learning and assessments</td>
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<td>Phase 3</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Standards and Curriculum</td>
<td>• NM Common Core (CCSS)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Eureka Math Adoption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• ReadyGen Reading Adoption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Reading Philosophy shift; new Tier 2 and 3 interventions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• New Student Assistant Team (SAT) Process and teams</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Refining of RTI understanding; New Tier 1b</td>
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<tr>
<td>Phase 4</td>
<td>2016 – Present</td>
<td>New RTI Process and Procedures</td>
<td>• 7 Habits and Lighthouse for PBIS</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Schoolwide focus; SLT, SAT, and CTTs focus on student performance and improvement; NM Dash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Phonics and phonemic awareness for K-2 Heggerty</td>
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Efforts described in each phase continued to be implemented, while each new phase incorporated new processes and structures for support. The new processes and structures garnered more focus to ensure positive outcomes. Priorities changed as RTI goals were adopted, but RTI implementation continued to be refined in the areas.

The next section notes Contigo’s teachers' and administrators’ experience with RTI implementation of a social-emotional and academic framework. The following sections briefly
detail the implementation efforts. This section only highlights what the school did to implement. Many of the areas like new curriculums, new technology, and SAT processes will be expanded in later research questions. This response is to explain what the school did to implement RTI. In Appendix O, a chronological chart detailed the implementation events.

**Phase 1: Social and Emotional Adjustments**

Prior to the implementation of the RTI framework, school districts throughout the United States faced increased pressure to meet proficiency standards set by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001. To complement the NCLB, the federal government passed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that involved public education supporting students with special education needs for ages 3 – 21. The broad legislation allowed states to develop their own plans for interventions, imposing only a set of standards to achieve for the general student population.

The New Mexico Public Education Department (NM PED) worked with state lawmakers to create a rule that required schools to organize a three-tier model to match students with the appropriate level of instruction, assessments, monitoring, and interventions if needed. The NM PED specifically states:

New Mexican schools must adhere to the RTI guidelines. Within New Mexico, RTI is an integrated service delivery approach for all students and should be applied to decisions in general, remedial, and special education. RTI is the process that all Student Assistance Teams (SATs) in New Mexico must follow to ensure that schools meet all students’ needs. (NM PED, 2006)
The multi-tiered framework and interventions provided much-needed support and substantial advantages to students; this was especially true for low-achieving and at-risk students like those found in New Mexico schools.

New Mexico is a very diverse state with African-American, American Indian, Asian/Pacific, Caucasian (non-Hispanic), and Hispanic students. Nathanson (2016) describes many of the obstacles New Mexico educators face for positive student outcomes:

- New Mexico has the highest rate of children living in poverty in the country at just under 30%;
- The rate of child abuse and neglect in New Mexico surpasses the national average, and;
- Children in this state also experience higher levels of food insecurity than many other places.

The following figure describes the NM PED three-tiered model.

Figure 2. New Mexico's Three-Tier Model from the New Mexico Public Education Department (2009)

The New Mexico three-tier model utilizes research-based instruction and interventions. The state requires a research-based core instructional program that supports most general
education students in Tier 1. Universal screening three times a year provides staff with baseline data to make informed data-based decisions for students who may need interventions and Tier 2 or Tier 3 support.

Since 2004, Contigo, the elementary school for this study, has implemented an integrated RTI model with academic and behavioral systems of supports for its students. In phase 1, the school experienced the social-emotional side of RTI through the Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS). When they introduced the PBIS into the school culture, the school developed a program called the Three Rs: being respectful, being responsible, and being ready. Additionally, the guidance counselor instructed students through a new program called Second Step that reinforced social skill development.

During the implementation of PBIS, the guidance counselor, Georgia, provided support and instruction on social and emotional skill development in the school for new teachers and all students in the building. Georgia described the implementation of the Second Step program:

When we began, we had many in-services on what that meant and what that looked like to each of the stakeholders. Not only with the District but within our building here at the school, we wanted to look at all of our kids, which really bought into our philosophy using the Second Step, as part of a guidance and counseling program, because we believe that all kids deserve that preventative kind of program. Georgia explained how the school procured materials through grants to ensure Second Step instruction would take place for their kindergarten through 5th-grade students. Teachers received Second Step kits and trained on how to use them. School administrators expected new teachers were coming to the district after implementation of the Second Step to attend Second Step
training during their first year in order to maintain a consistent vocabulary and understanding of the program throughout the school.

In the detailing student experiences with the Second Step, Georgia explained how the program engaged with students to develop social awareness through lessons delivered by teachers. The lessons focused on self-regulation, how students should regulate their feelings, and reinforce positive interactions. Many of the lessons provided examples for being respectful, how to focus by staying on task, and how to be assertive. The lessons utilized a common language for staff and students to use when needing dealing with expectations for behavior. Through initial steps into implementing a PBIS/RTI program, students were more receptive and better prepared to receive the subsequent phases of the NM PED RTI framework. This was also true for all of the stakeholders involved with the implementation of the RTI framework.

Phase 2: Data-based Decision Making

During phase 2, the teachers and administrators engaged in a more formal and evolving process of data-based decision making, where grade-level teams targeted student needs and evaluated student outcomes. Assessments for data collection changed during the implementation of phase 2. Professional development in buildings supported the various assessments. Train the trainer sessions that focused on the school building methods were used to support these efforts.

In 2007, with the new RTI regulations from the NM PED in place, the teachers and administrators sought to adjust to the expectations. As the RTI processes began in the school, teacher’s anxiety around how to meet the new expectations and processes rose. To support the change, Ana, the special education teacher, explained how teachers and administrators worked together:
It started through the administration, bringing in people to train us on how to read data, what it looks like, and where you can go to get resources? Like, for instance, NWEA has a section there that if your child is falling in this area, you can go over here and it'll give you examples of this is what they need to start learning… Just having that time to get the specific training and the time to get in there and play with it was very helpful… Every year, it just seems like it gets better and better because we're starting to see the positive effects of it, and more and more people are buying into it and seeing what each grade level has to do.

Many participants explained how data interpretation became the focus of the whole school. With increasing demands to understand RTI better and interpret student data, the principal established a time for teachers to continue interpreting performance data. These measures coordinated teachers' and administrators’ efforts to focus on RTI and student performance.

Ivy, a veteran teacher of over forty years, explained: “The role of the teacher has shifted into one that’s more directed towards looking at data.” Teachers' use of data from assessments changed their role and better informed their instruction. Furthermore, the grade level chairs at the Collaborative Teaching Teams (CTT)s were key to the implementation of RTI. They were an important conduit of communication because they were empowered to lead their fellow colleagues. George, the special education instructional leader, felt that the CTT grade level chairs were empowered to make decisions that supported the instructional needs of students. George explained: “Grade levels are the key, in my mind, to the success of RTI. If those key teachers were not supporting each other and the principal’s vision of the school, it would not be successful like it is here in the school.”
Amelia, the principal, diligently worked on developing trust with all teachers. As principal, she knew the grade level chairs were the key to their team’s success because each teacher helped shape how their colleagues would move forward implementing RTI changes. Amelia explained: “We're building that culture. You have to have that piece in order to facilitate change and challenges and everything that we do. And if you don't have that culture, you don't have trust. You don't have that ability to build those teams.” Amelia also mandated a new morning Collaborative Teaching Team (CTT) organized by the administration, so that administration would be consistently present at all grade level CTT meetings each month. A CTT meeting included teachers, usually from a specific grade level, to meet to discuss RTI needs, curriculum, student performance data, and interventions. The morning CTT became a monthly meeting with each grade level.

Student assessments were at the center of data-based decision making and the creation of CTTs. The state-mandated that all students in kindergarten through third grade give the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) reading assessment to assess and monitor progress. In addition to DIBELS, the Cactus School District supported the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) universal screener for grades 3 – 12 to assess student progress, performance, and make curriculum adjustments. For grades K – 2, NWEA assessments were given later in the implementation process when the district decided to use it as a universal measure for all grades. Training took place in building on how to use and interpret NWEA at the lower grade levels.

The shift to use NWEA for all grades supported general education’s effort to identify at-risk students in the lower grades better. Diagnosticians who performed student evaluations appreciated that it was normed. The normed referenced tests provided a percentile ranking
against an average population. The percentages guided the work done by CTTs, SAT teams, special education in MDT meetings, and diagnosticians for special education determination. The interpretation and cut scores of the assessments guided their work in prioritizing students across the RTI framework, especially for students in the SAT process and for SAT coordination.

Early in phase two, teachers used only one data point, NWEA, to assess students according to the RTI framework. This changed with the implementation of DIBELS, a research-based, online tool used to provide assessments of a student’s foundational reading progress. Later in phase two, CTT meetings incorporated data from various assessments like common formative assessments, universal screening data like NWEA, and Istation and Istation’s progress monitoring. Participants explained the multiple data points became more the norm in discussing student performance and trends in analyzing data. One participant, Emily, explained:

At the time, we went with NWEA. That was a determining factor… And now, so in the primary grades, they look at both NWEA and Istation together. And the classroom, the PBAs [performance-based assessments] and the math test, they do take those into consideration.

According to Gabrielle, for special education eligibility evaluations, the diagnosticians, “love NWEA and Istation, as it helped narrow down referrals from SAT to MDT due to the tests both being normed.” The CTTs discussed a variety of assessments pertaining to all students, which helped target students at-risk in Tier 1 and those students needing Tier 2 intervention.

Participants explained their interpretation of the universal screeners, NWEA and Istation, and the progress monitoring of Istation supported teacher’s decisions around flexible groups and understanding of where students fell behind in their skill development. Ana, a special education
teacher, leveraged the assessment tool’s data analysis feature to develop IEPs, inform flexible instructional groupings in her classroom and monitor student progress over time. She stated:

Well, personally, for me, as a special ed teacher, I love both of them [NWEA and Istation]. Right now, I was in third, fourth and fifth for so long that we just mainly used NWEA, gave me some good information, but it wasn’t tested enough. Istation is tested once a month, and I love it because what I do is it goes in there, and it gives me specific areas, and it tells me over and over and over, where this kid has fallen through the crack. From there, I can take that and write specific goals that will improve that area. Now, as special ed teacher, I just love that because it’s data, it’s not, Oh, I think, or kind of like the DRA, there’s a lot of interpretation … This is what it says, this is what I’m seeing in the classroom, this is exactly how I need you to help me with my child, and this is what I’m doing for your child. Then, it also helps you create those RTIs [flexible groups].

At the classroom level, teachers, such as Ana, utilized multiple points of data to inform and guide students’ instruction and intervention so that their instruction targeted deficits, and they closely monitored progress.

Teachers changed isolationistic tendencies toward “ownership of all kids,” which aligned to a more systematic approach to RTI. This change toward ownership of all students altered the way teachers and administrators talked about students and used student performance data in new ways. Teams like CTTs and SLTs reviewed grade level and schoolwide data. Reginald, the veteran physical education teacher and SAT team member for many years, explained:

I think it goes back to once teachers bought into RTI, and they said, well, we can’t get rid of this. We gotta do it anyway… And once they started working as a staff to say, Okay, we have ownership of all these kids, I think that there’s a lot of positive things since
number one, everybody’s talking with the same words. And you got the same forms and all that kind of stuff. I think that’s a plus. I think that as a result of that, there’s more data, because we’re a data-driven district, and so the more data you have to support. It’s not just a feeling, you know, because the data says this.

Through training and ongoing school meetings, teachers and administrators moved beyond wondering and feelings if a student needed support or may have a disability. Armed with current student performance data, multiple data points, and the RTI process, the professional staff engaged in learning how to use the RTI framework to understand the needs of their students better and identify students at-risk.

**Phase 3: Standards and Curriculum**

In phase 3, teachers and administrators discussed how New Mexico adopted Common Core standards, along with new curriculum adoptions in reading and mathematics impacted teaching and learning. The NM PED required the District to phase the standards into elementary and then secondary schools. Mathematics instructional shifts included: focus, coherence, fluency, deep understanding, applications, and dual intensity. English Language Arts (ELA) instructional shifts included: focus on informational text, text complexity, text-dependent questions and tasks, evidence-based writing, and academic vocabulary.

The school district coordinated with the school on how to pace and implement these new standards. Professional staff engaged in a yearlong development period to adjust instruction and support for these new standards. During Phase 3, new curriculums, instructional methods, and New Mexico Common Core Standards (CCSS) all played a role in developing instruction throughout the RTI pyramid. Due to the new standards, report cards at the elementary level transitioned to standards-based reporting. The building and district provided professional
development to implement the new standards, curriculum adoption for math, and standards-based report cards.

Administration, with consultation from SLT, created a new master schedule that established long core blocks of ELA and math instruction along with an intervention RTI block for each grade level. The school district provided instructional minutes’ guidelines for both subjects. The SLT and assigned individuals worked on a new master schedule that provided long blocks of reading and math instruction, while providing related arts instruction and other necessary student daily activities, such as recess and lunch. The school district administrator from Curriculum & Instruction established building guidelines for ELA and math instruction. The new master schedule for the building also allotted intervention time slots during core instruction.

In 2016, the school administration required a separate and visible intervention block and a more formalized structure to the intervention done by teachers. Reginald, the veteran physical education teacher, explained: “I don’t know that the students know that they are actually taking part in the intervention. They just know I got to this group. I have to go to counselors. It’s part of what I do.” The combination of schedule changes and the inclusion for students to receive intervention and enrichment as part of the school culture created a seamless experience for the students, therefore mitigating any emotional or behavioral effects that an intervention may create.

The Eureka math adoption met the NM CCSS and expectations. The district piloted curriculum programs the year prior and selected this program due to its alignment to NM CCSS. The math program provided formative assessments, exit tickets for progress monitoring, and alignment to CCSS. The school trainers, people who were on the adoption committee, trained the
staff on the Eureka math program. Teachers and administrators engaged in a yearlong professional development during the first year of using Eureka math as the core program. The math program adopted for K – 12 ensured that mathematical thinking, math language, and skills developed across ages and remained consistent.

With the use of core programs, participants saw more consistency across the instructional core programs. Teachers’ instruction has become more consistent and aligned through the changes to core curriculum programs. Emily, a former first-grade teacher, and technology integration specialist, explained:

There’s a lot more fidelity in the programs. The core instruction is more aligned across the school, which does make a difference, especially for vertical articulation. You’re not having as many holes because every teacher says things; differently, every teacher has a different vocabulary. And when you’re following an actual program, you still have some of that, but not at the same level.

Participants described how the structured alignment of CCSS, new core curricula, and interventions to the needs of students across the RTI pyramid fostered more positive outcomes.

Beyond core curriculum adoptions, the school district supported other Tier 1 instructional methods. For example, the district trained K – 5 staff on Thinking Maps that are visual charts used to organize thinking. Thinking Maps contain eight, visual-verbal learning tools, each based on a fundamental thinking process and used together as a set of tools for showing relationships. School professional trainers were instructed on how to use Thinking Maps by the Thinking Maps certified trainers.

Assessments evolved during this phase, as well. The NM PED mandated that all students in grades 3 – 12 be given the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers
(PARCC) assessment because it aligned to the CCSS goals. Building professional development training on early release Wednesdays supported the shift to the PARCC assessment. The PARCC data became a factor in school letter grades and teacher evaluations for teachers in grades 3 – 12.

For grades K – 3, the original reading assessment DIBELS was transitioned to Istation, which became the state-mandated assessment for reading. The Istation reading assessment was utilized as a universal screening and progress monitoring tool. The test focused on phonemic awareness, letter knowledge, alphabetic decoding vocabulary, spelling, comprehension, and fluency. The Istation assessments monitored student progress, assisted teachers and staff with immediate feedback and analysis, and provided teacher-directed reinforcing and remedial lessons for students who need them. The Istation assessment was also used in primary grade teachers’ evaluations.

At the district level, NM PED mandated a change in practice for gifted eligibility. The school district used did not meet compliance expectations for the standard assessments, Kaufman Brief Intelligence Test (KBIT) and Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC), which forced the district chose one of the methods approved by the state. The new gifted assessment, FTAP, was implemented for screening second-grade students and determining a pool of students to determine eligibility in third grade. Specific members of the professional and administrative staff were trained on the assessment. Gifted teachers were also trained on FTAP and worked with second-grade teachers to determine possible candidates for gifted eligibility in third grade.

At the school level, teachers and administrators worked together to provide enriched instructional experiences for selected fifth-grade students who excel in mathematics. The teacher of the gifted began a fifth-grade pre-algebra class for gifted and high achieving students. The fifth-grade teachers used Eureka math assessments to build flexible groups and provide
instruction for these excelling students. If students lacked understanding of Eureka's pre-unit assessment, they would receive the main lesson of instruction from regular education teachers for 15 – 20 minutes and then go to enrichment pre-algebra. This flexible approach provided extension and enrichment for selected students while monitoring math skills at the grade level.

In the next phase, the RTI processes in PBIS and SAT evolved to support students differently. A reevaluation of the district’s reading philosophy and instruction impacted the RTI instruction, teachers, and administrators, as they continued to adjust to new curriculum adoptions and interventions that supported the new reading focus.

**Phase 4: New RTI Process and Procedures**

During phase 4, the refining of a variety of RTI processes over a ten-year period had resulted in changes to curriculum, assessments, instruction, and, more importantly, the RTI pyramid. The school administration and teachers utilized new districtwide documents to revisit site based RTI process. This team developed new procedures, including SAT processes in building, and provided training. This new understanding established a clearer role for Tier 1 instruction for students and teachers and divided Tier 1 into two groups: Tier 1a and Tier 1b. Tier 1a instruction supported students within the general population. Students needing support from a teacher, but not at Tier 2 intervention levels and SAT, would be supported at the Tier 1b level. Tier 1b instruction consisted of the reteaching of the skill or changes in instructional approaches in order to master the grade level skill.

Students in need of Tier 2 instruction and intervention were recognized as needing more intense instruction because these students’ learning gaps were off-grade level. Therefore, SAT plans for students receiving Tier 2 intervention needed to provide the appropriate intervention at the level that looked to address the student’s learning deficit by working toward accelerating
student learning through intense instruction and shrinking the instructional learning gaps. Tier 3 continued to be recognized as students in need of special education instruction. Lucia, the teacher of the gifted and SAT facilitator, explained:

I think there’s a lot of variation within the pyramid. I think you’ve got Tier 1a, Tier 1b. You’ve got room for a little bit closer contact. You don’t have to go into SAT to have your needs met. Then, once the student doesn’t need that, then you’ve got that next layer. Supporting all students differently.

By defining each tier, teacher responsibilities and student needs at each level of intervention inside the triangle were articulated more clearly. The new district RTI pyramid is shown below in Figure 8.
During phase 4, a new schoolwide focus on improvement became required by the state called the NM Data, Accountability, Sustainability, and High Achievement (NM DASH). The school improvement focus outlined in the NM DASH impacted both the elementary school’s SAT process and CTTs. The SAT teams were restructured to better support parents and students. The school district underwent a shift toward a phonics-based approach for students’ reading instruction and interventions, especially for at-risk students. At the school level, new RTI processes were implemented for SAT, tiered instruction, and data-based decision making. The CTTs began a more formal process and structure for instruction and data, which evolved during the 2018 – 2019 school year.
The purchase of new curriculum and interventions, like Heggerty, supported this shift in reading philosophy for general education and special education. The school expanded its PBIS philosophy to incorporate the *Seven Habits of Happy Kids* (2008) by Sean Covey, which is based on Stephen Covey’s seminal book *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. The school integrated the seven habits into the daily activities of students and staff.

Several changes to RTI instruction and processes impacted teachers and administrators. The changes involved RTI process and structures, philosophical reading shift, reading material adoptions, PBIS, technology, and school improvement. Teachers were provided training on the new pyramid by the building instructional coach and district curriculum coaches. Additionally, all general education staff was assigned to an SAT team. With the changes in RTI roles and responsibilities and RTI processes, teachers and support staff stress levels rose due to these changes, but the teachers saw the benefit of these changes. Ana, the special education teacher, described the shift and evolution of RTI in the building:

> It [RTI] changed practices because it used to be more driven through special ed. Now, it's driven through data, and gen education has taken hold of it. It not only helps the students that I work with, but it also helps the ELL students. It also helps the students who are gifted because those kids are hard to move too. It helps everybody at one point. There's not one kid it doesn't touch.

Due to the new RTI understanding, SAT processes and structured teams, teachers saw these changes supporting in their efforts to best meet the academic and behavioral needs of all students.

New SAT documents provided specific and targeted skill identification for reading deficits, expectations for progress monitoring, and development of students that aligned to ELA
and math NM CCSS and social-emotional developmental needs. From academics to behavior, more detailed plans and processes were outlined. Since the new structure and procedures were put in place, teachers and administrators were provided ongoing SAT and RTI training each year.

The new SAT structure required all certified staff to participate in an SAT team. The shift from two teams to eight SAT teams allowed parental involvement to coincide with RTI’s scheduled expectations.

Another change that impacted core reading instruction and interventions involved the district reviewing student success within the core program with a leading researcher. A Read to Lead grant, which was awarded from the state, funded the outside expert’s consultation on curriculum and district performance. The expert, Dr. Fierro, also provided training for K – 2 teachers and administrators. In consultation with the district, he suggested a reading shift for instruction and intervention to ensure a stronger foundation in phonics and phonemic awareness.

The following year, Dr. Fierro provided instruction for grade 3 teachers. The goal of all his training was to build an understanding of foundational reading skills with a heavy focus on students with characteristics of dyslexia.

Dr. Fierro instructed teachers about brain development with reading research in mind. The instruction focused on explaining how the instructional practices and resources needed better alignment with students’ reading needs. This study’s participants shared how he explained that the brain strands were woven into skilled reading across two areas: language comprehension and word recognition skills. Dr. Fierro’s training impacted teachers and their new approach to students’ RTI instructional needs, as Isla, a veteran first-grade teacher, explained:

The training we have had with Dr. Fierro on phonemic awareness has helped teachers understand the importance of foundational skills for children as they embark on learning...
how to read, which has also influenced the specific areas of need for children when receiving RTI.

Administrators and teachers in grades K – 3 described hearing a consistent message on how to address a student’s reading deficit by matching certain curriculums, resources, and reading expertise to these students.

Reading curriculums changed across all tiers of instruction. They took place to ensure materials aligned with providing a solid foundation in reading and aligned to CCSS. The ReadyGen, a core program, and ReadyUp, the intervention program, were selected for Tier 1 instruction and Tier 2 reading intervention. The district had looked at reading assessment data and made the decision to supplement the core reading program with Heggerty, reading phonics, and phonemic awareness program. The Heggerty program was implemented to supplement foundation reading skills for Tier 1 instruction because the ReadyGen Core program does not instruct in these skills well enough, as determined by student assessments. Professional Development and training on the new Heggerty program took place in the spring of school year on an early release Wednesday. Teachers would use ReadyUp for Tier 1b or Tier 2 instruction. During the adoption of the new ReadyGen reading program, Pearson trainers trained the school trainer, who subsequently trained the school’s professional staff. The ReadyGen training took place on early release Wednesdays and PD days. ReadyUp training took place in the spring for second-grade teachers by the instructional coach, while training for other grades would follow for the next year.

Sounds Sensible and West Virginia Reading First Phonics Lessons were selected by the District to address students’ foundational reading development deficits in Tier 2. These programs shifted away from the District’s whole language philosophy to teaching phonics and phonemic
awareness more directly; reading interventions and teachers could still use whole language instruction materials, such as LLI, for students that needed this intervention. Reading Interventionists were trained by the district.

For Tier 3, the district adopted S.P.I.R.E., part of the Orton-Gillingham based program, to support Tier 3 reading instruction. The S.P.I.R.E. program focused on foundational reading skills and aligned with the other programs recently adopted by the district. With the connection to the CCSS, the new reading curricula and intervention materials aligned the RTI processes and developed fidelity of instruction across the stakeholders. The curriculum was aligned with supporting students at various tiers of instruction. Fiona, the assistant principal, explained:

Whenever we adopt instructional materials at the district, we make sure that our instructional materials have something aligned to those tiers. We have ReadyUp for the kids that need more support in reading. I was trained on S.P.I.R.E. That's great support. You can use that with general ed or special ed kids. We now have the Heggerty phonics. I mean, there's a lot of things that we do in our district to support kids at different tiers.

As a result of all the changes, teachers’ reading instructional practices and interventions aligned to meet students’ needs and CCSS. Additionally, teachers’ reading instruction provided clear vertical programming and more instructional fidelity across the school.

Initially, the school used PBIS to develop a program called the Three Rs: being respectful, being responsible, and being ready. The latest program evolved through the Lighthouse Committee that adopted the Seven Habits of Happy Kids. The Lighthouse Committee comprised of both regular and special education teachers who wanted to incorporate a new student behavioral system in the school. Participants described how teachers and administration expanded PBIS to support students differently in the school. The teachers began introducing
tickets for behavior expectations and enlisting student role models into the school day. At the end of the year, PBIS added student attendance targets for each day to improve daily attendance.

The Lighthouse Committee identified leadership qualities and behaviors that went above and beyond typical student interactions. The goal was to find ways for students, teachers, and administrators to be actively engaged with recognizing students for positive acts of leadership. An example of a leadership quality looked for win-win situations. Participants explained that students earned tickets if they demonstrated leadership skills. Tickets with the child’s name were placed into bins in the main office. At the end of the week, student tickets were drawn. Two student leaders were identified and announced for each grade. The students wore a badge during this week as a recognition of their role for the week. Daily announcements highlighted the goal for the week and reminded students of what behavioral expectations looked like. These student leaders also helped identify other peers by handing out tickets the following week. Amelia, the principal, stated:

We do a lot of different things about “seven habits,” because we want them to internalize it. The character is not because I have a toy. The character is within. So we’re trying to build that piece as well. And all staff need to use that language too. So, we’re trying to always encourage that.

Amelia also described how she expected teachers to participate and that the character development was necessary. Isla, a first-grade teacher and Lighthouse Committee chair, also explained how the schoolwide model recognized students:

We have leaders every week from each grade level, and they get to be a leader by doing an act of kindness or an act of something that goes above and beyond. It’s not, you push my chair in, it’s going above and beyond that. Like doing an initiative that they’re not
even being asked to do, they just do it. Then they go down, and they take their leadership
tickets, they get to put them in their grade level bucket, and then every Friday we pull
tickets. Those children become the leaders of the week, and they get to wear a lanyard for
the week. Then they are the ones that get to pass out tickets to children that they see
doing activities that they feel earn a ticket.

The Lighthouse Committee worked with the administration to implement a new schoolwide
behavior program, where student recognition remained a key component based upon students’
modeling the new Seven Habit philosophy.

With a focus on student leadership and recognition, the Lighthouse committee worked to
start a perfect attendance chain displayed outside the library. For each perfect day, a chain would
be added. Once a certain number was reached, a song was played over the loudspeakers. With
music blaring over the school sound system, teachers and students danced throughout the
building. The efficacy of this attendance program was explained by Fiona:

I saw it work really well for attendance. Students had created those chains last year. I saw
that affect our student attendance, and if that can improve attendance, fantastic. That’s
one of the things that I like to see is incentives to get kids here, to get them in the
classroom, handing out the tickets for opening a door that kind of stuff. I’m not a fan of
it. For the attendance, it made a huge difference for them.

The Lighthouse Committee teachers and administration continued to refine efforts to encourage
students and recognize them in unique and motivational ways.

The teachers and administrators expanded the PBIS model to incorporate recognition
student and classroom attendance. The focus on attendance, fun dancing, student leadership
tickets, daily and weekly announcements on the *Seven Habits of Happy Kids*, pencil rewards to
model leadership students, and student leadership badges motivated students while reinforcing school-wide expectations for behavior and leadership. This initiative changed teaching practices by expanding new leadership and behavioral expectations for students into daily practices.

Technology also impacted teaching and learning through the adoption of the Google Platform and 1:1 Chromebook initiative at the elementary level. The district required the shift from a previous system. Google Platform supports Tier 1 instruction because it is a collaborative platform that allows teachers to share instructional lessons, monitor and store student work and projects, communicate with families in regard to student performance and work. Google Classroom, which is part of the Google Platform, lets teachers communicate with students, manage and distribute assignments and stay organized. District training for Google Classroom took place over the summer. The school’s professional development continued to take place on early release Wednesdays by education technology specialist. At the district level, a 1:1 computer initiative took place to phase Chromebooks into K – 5 schools. The first phase of Chromebooks supported four of the five classrooms in 4th and 5th grade, along with the 3rd-grade pilot classroom. The following year, all classrooms had access to Chromebooks.

Chromebooks supported Tier 1 instruction, as well as had the availability to provide online intervention services. The impact on instruction and assessments allowed differentiation for students. With Chromebooks in the classrooms, they made available more individualized instruction and intervention. Students took all assessments in the classroom rather than in a computer lab.

School improvement has become focused on the new state improvement method called New Mexico Data, Accountability, Sustainability, and High Achievement (NM DASH). NM DASH is a 90-day school improvement plan. Contigo Elementary School completed this
improvement plan twice a year. Participants, Oliver and Victoria, agreed that administration with
the SLT formalized the schoolwide RTI goals within the school’s improvement plan detailed in
NM DASH. Previously, the administration focused the school improvement plan on
implementing the new processes for CTTs and SAT to address student growth through direct
targeting of instruction and intervention for specific populations. Oliver stated:

One of our goals for our school is to get both kids growing. So, I think that's changed in
the last couple of years the way I've been doing groupings. I really focus on my lowest
lows and my highest highs more so than I did before. The school conversation is what
started it, and the NM D.A.S.H. made it more formal, I think.

In the school improvement plans, administrators directed the teaching staff to target student
interventions through the new SAT process. Fiona, the assistant principal, explained: “We have
several SAT chairs and teams, everyone participates. That’s part of our New Mexico DASH goal
last year was our SAT process.” The first two years of Contigo’s NM DASH plans focused on
SAT structure and SAT processes and students in SAT or at-risk for needing Tier 2 intervention.
The new NM DASH plan for 2018 – 2019 will focus on the CTTs moving forward. These plans
required CTTs to target students learning within core instruction and match intervention for
specific students and ensure student progress.

The administration used the NM DASH to communicate the goals for school
improvement with the larger school community, which included providing more details on the
direction and vision. Administrators, Fiona and Amelia, worked with the NM DASH
subcommittee on the SLT in the spring of 2018 to develop the new goal of focusing the morning
CTT meetings on targeting instructional improvement through the analysis of a variety of
assessments and student work samples, which was to be implemented in the following school
year. The new goal was developed in response to teacher frustrations, such as the ones expressed by Oliver and Victoria, both grade-level chairs, who indicated that the current morning format for CTTs with the administration did not allow enough time for teachers to have instructional improvement conversations. Additionally, the new format of the CTT meetings would allow participants to provide feedback to Dakota, the facilitator of the new CTTs and instructional coach, that she, in turn, could then use to plan the next month’s CTT meeting. Leveraging NM DASH, the administration was able to communicate RTI-related goals to the school community that was designed to better support students and guide the work of teachers.

Several participants described how believing in the data was a tipping point in the implementation process. Teachers and administrators found that utilizing multiple measures that accurately reflected student performance really provided the foundational support necessary to further empower data-based decision-making processes in CTT and SAT team meetings. Teachers consistently utilized both universal assessments like NWEA and the new Istation assessments along with the new progress-monitoring tools to effectively support the team based RTI-related practices of analyzing instructional practices and targeting student interventions. The teachers’ trust in the data unlocked the individual approach necessary for an RTI framework. Due to this trust, teachers and administration were focused on their collaborative-collective efforts to improve student growth and performance.

Section Summary

The first research narrative response showed the complexity of RTI implementation. The numerous changes in legislation directed state, district, and school administrators to address student performance. The RTI process had to be navigated and implemented in a productive and efficacious way that occurred during four distinct phases. The phases tended to last four years.
Phases 3 focused on curriculum, instruction, and intervention alignment to standards to ensure appropriate instruction within Tiers 1 and 2. Phase 4 focused on the new RTI and SAT processes that would better support students.

Many factors internal to the school and external from the district and state impacted RTI implementation in Contigo Elementary School. Several key areas like the SAT process, CTTs improvement of tiered instruction and intervention, and schedules evolved to allow for more collaboration or instructional support in the tiers. Internal processes like CTTs, schedules, RTI and SAT practices evolved to adjust to meet the continuous demands of improving student performance and growth. External factors, like NM DASH and state-mandated assessments, impacted internal practices.

Time was an important factor for the implementation of RTI, specifically through professional development. Early release Wednesdays were critical to do anything with grade-level teams, standards, curriculum and instruction, and discuss student needs. The opportunity to work together consistently was essential for the elementary implementation of RTI. The early release Wednesdays provided ongoing conversations and space to enable opportunities for professional conversations. Through early release Wednesdays and professional days, the CTTs and SLTs focused conversations around curriculum and instruction processes. The time for planning and prioritizing and reflecting on instruction practices were evident and linked to these early release Wednesdays and professional development days.

Table 14 in Appendix O detailed Phases 1 – 4 from 2004 to 2019. It documented what has been described in the narrative portion of this section. The tabled noted the numerous changes that continued to evolve to support an integrated RTI framework, where both academic
and social-emotional sides of the period underwent changes. Table 14 noted the year of implementation, what was implemented, and how it affected RTI.

**RTI’s Impact on Teaching Practices**

In response to the second research question regarding how the implementation of the integrated model of RTI changed teaching practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico, three themes emerged from the data. These three themes were as follows: 1) individualizing instruction; 2) improving cooperation across stakeholders; and 3) leveraging data analysis and progress monitoring to refine instruction. The following paragraphs will explicate these themes in the service of facilitating a robust picture of the influence RTI implementation had on participants’ teaching practices.

**Individualizing Instruction.**

The first theme that emerged in response to the second research question was *Individualizing Instruction*, which represents the instructional shift teachers experienced in how they supported the unique needs of each student. Individualizing instruction is defined as teachers customizing teaching practices to each student’s learning needs. Participants explained instructional changes toward individualization as teachers instructing multi-layered groups of students, teaching discrete versus generalized skills, scheduling time for student-specific interventions, and using technology to individualize instruction. An example of the theme is noted in Ivy’s comments around instructional practices. Ivy, a twenty-seven-year veteran second-grade teacher, explained that due to RTI and the changes in curriculum, her instruction shifted from a whole group focus to a more targeted approach with small, flexible instructional groups across all instructional levels. She stated:

I am more aware of what my students’ needs are now with RTI than I ever was in the
past. When we first starting teaching, we would do themes… It would be an ocean theme, So, it’s [instruction] changed from that, and just making it up as you go, to really being, and trying to find a good focus. But, truly, it was more theme-oriented and it was more you just observed. A lot of observation. It’s gotten now where I am very focused on what I teach. There’s no spare time on things. There just isn’t. I know what I need to target and what students need to be working on. I target my workstations within my classroom on those, and I have RTI reinforcement in my workstations, while I’m also calling kids up for small group intervention.

Participants expressed that RTI changed instructional practices such that they were more focused on individual student learning needs rather than on the learning needs of those “average” students. Participants described their instructional practices as shifting from only teaching to the middle to implementing a more individualized approach. Instruction that was typically whole group shifted to small groups that were differentiated by skill level (low, medium, and high) and student needs. As a veteran special education teacher in the school who taught at many grade levels, Ana observed the shift within general education classrooms. She explained that while planning for small-group instruction took more time for general classroom teachers. They saw the benefits to student learning that resulted from this shift in practice. She stated:

It's harder to plan, takes longer planning time to do small groups throughout the day than one whole lesson. That's been a shift, but I tell you these amazing professionals have decided, I am willing to do that because I see it [the benefit to students]. Throughout the whole day. You see, less whole group instruction may be used to be a lot. Now, it's so minimal and then, it's off to the small groups.
Isla, a first-grade teacher, shared how her instruction changed to address the needs of low, middle, and high achieving learners. Isla felt that teachers no longer just moved ahead to the next lesson regardless of students’ level of understanding, but instead individualized the pace of instruction in response to students’ performance. Isla detailed this experience:

I think a lot of times with RTI, our focus is on the children who are struggling the most. I think we tend to forget about the students who are excelling, or what we would consider at grade level or above. I think in the past, some of the teachings we did met that middle core, that average student. Where I think RTI helps you focus is to not forget about the ones that are above and the ones that have those gaps that you’re still trying to connect for them. I think it changed practices because it made you think a little bit differently, instead of just one broad lesson. It’s now, okay, how can I make this lesson reach all areas. What can I do to make sure that I’m differentiating different activities? We’re still working towards the same end results of understanding what that lesson objective was. I sometimes think in the past it was more if I just taught that lesson, we’re good, we can move on, let’s go to the next lesson. Where now, it’s you really take that time to think about all of those areas and make sure that either you differentiate or you scaffold to make sure it reaches every child.

General classroom teachers changed their instructional practices from solely whole group instruction to include more small-group, multi-layered instruction as doing so better targeted students’ instructional needs.

Multiple teachers shared that teaching discrete versus general skills became increasingly necessary to individualize RTI for students in Tier 1B and Tier 2. Isla, a veteran first-grade teacher, additionally explained that one of the significant RTI changes with individualizing
instruction for students in Tier 1B and Tier 2 was to monitor the progress of the development of a discrete skill rather than of a broad topic area. She stated:

I think the biggest thing [change] was trying to make sure to hone into a certain skill, that was more centered on a certain learning criteria, versus this big broad spectrum that would be very hard to progress monitor, and make sure that they were meeting every one of those target areas. Even just in the classroom, it's like trying to make sure you find that skill, that's going to help build upon to the next skill, and the next skill, and the next skill.

To get them up to where you want them to be at grade level.

From observations in SAT meetings, teachers identified instructional skill gaps for students. To address a student’s reading gap, for example, the Sound and Sensible intervention was selected to improve reading fluency in the area of phonological awareness. The SAT team would then create a targeted proficiency goal of 70% mastery in six weeks related to the student’s identified skill deficiency. Gabrielle, the SAT coordinator, compared the old SAT process to the new one. She explained:

The new SAT forms are great. Before, it was difficult to find whether interventions had been tried or materials had been used [on the handwritten forms]. It was all handwritten in there, so poor handwriting, poor organization, and not clear places where you would put information. These new forms really cleaned it up with the drop-down menus. So on the first page, you can see what the concerns were for reading, writing, behavior or math. Just at a glance, you can see. And then, in the next few pages, you can see the actual scores and interventions.

In the eight SAT meetings observed, each team identified a concept needing improvement, then drilled down into the skill that would be addressed. These efforts geared toward skill
development became common practice. For Tier 1B and Tier 2 students, teachers worked to align their instruction and interventions with the identified skill deficits.

Several participants explained how they individualized instruction by leveraging an RTI scheduled time block called “enrichment,” where both enrichment and intervention were provided to students. Victoria, a veteran third-grade teacher, stated that she taught “two reading, two math” intervention blocks in a week. In determining math intervention for students, she explained, “I start with NWEA, and then as the semester goes on, I'll pull Exit Tickets on a concept. Okay, these kids don't get this, and I'll pull them.” The exit tickets in the math program provided feedback on the students’ grasp of the lesson’s targeted skill and standard. She reviewed the students’ exit tickets to develop weekly intervention groups with individualized, targeted instruction, to support students’ missing skills. Lucia, a teacher of the gifted, explained that she was able to challenge and individualize her instructional groups for math, science, and ELA by scheduling her students during the RTI intervention time. She explained, “having an RTI time has been beautiful because that's when I typically schedule my groups. Those kids, those gifted kiddos, are able to go into a place that's going to challenge them and enrich. That has been really good, too, to have that time.” In reviewing the school master schedule document, the longer blocks of core instruction along with separate enrichment blocks were found across all grade levels, which corroborated participants’ descriptions of enrichment blocks. Participants explained that individualizing instruction to student needs in the RTI block was a change in practice that helped them prioritize meeting each student’s instructional needs.

Participants also reported using technology to differentiate instruction. Luna, a third-grade teacher, shared how the introduction of technology changed how she differentiated her instruction. For example, she explained that students who had trouble with written expression
were able to demonstrate their skill level through other means, such as video recording their report instead of handwriting or typing it out. She explained:

The Google Suite has been awesome. They love doing anything with Google slides. We do these videos called Flipgrid. They're minute and a half videos, and the students are able to collaborate with their peers as they're making this video. We did weather reports, so they were all newscasters, recording their own weather reports and they had posters behind them, and it was great because those kids who do struggle with their written expression can really shine and be very animated and have so much more personality than you would ever get from them on paper. And I can assess it in the same way, based on their content. It's thinking about things a little bit differently, but the teaching and the learning is the same in a lot of ways. You just have to kind of adapt to your own thinking about it.

Emily, the education technology specialist, explained how a fifth-grade teacher differentiated instruction by using the Google platform to show students pre-selected and targeted instructional videos focused on ameliorating specific reading skill deficits. She stated:

The fifth-grade teacher came to me because he has such varied levels. He has students from kindergarten level to high school level. And he’s trying to figure out how to meet all of their needs, and he can’t. He doesn’t have special education support this year. So he was really struggling. And we’re working together through Google Classroom to make assignments and kind of a flipped classroom a little bit. So that the students are getting individualized instruction at their level, and then having an assignment that goes with that. So he’s on the computer lab monitor all of them and stopping and working with the students that are struggling. But they’re all able to have a different lesson.
Teachers utilized technology in a variety of ways to provide differentiated instruction for students.

In summary, according to participants, RTI altered their teaching practices such that they became more differentiated and individualized. Teachers shifted from whole group instruction to small-group, differentiated instruction to better support students. Additionally, teachers taught more discrete skills rather than general skills to address skill deficits for students in Tier 1B and Tier 2. With the integration of technology into classrooms and the designated RTI enrichment/intervention block, teachers referenced how they individualized instruction even further to support students’ performance.

**Improving Cooperation Across Stakeholders**

The second theme of *Improving Cooperation Across Stakeholders* characterizes the collaboration among teachers, parents, and school teams to support the implementation of RTI and improved instructional practices. It is defined as an increased collaboration among teachers, parents, and school staff in the service of supporting RTI implementation and its intended academic and social outcomes. Participants described cooperative changes as including parents in the SAT process, embodying the belief that everyone in the school community has ownership of all kids and having more frequent collaboration among teachers across grade levels and roles. The new focus on cooperation and collaboration challenged the isolationism that formerly characterized the way the members of the school community operated in relation to one another. Cooperation among teachers was facilitated by their participation in grade level, multi-grade level, and other types of teams (e.g., SAT) within the school. An example of collaboration was noted by Georgia, a long-time school guidance counselor in the building:
I think it [RTI] made 'em closer. [teachers] I think they share; I think they share more. I think before RTI, some of 'em were, like, little islands unto themselves. And I think with RTI, they are a collaborative group. They, you know, they collaborate about instruction, they share tools, one says, "I'll do this. Oh, I'm gonna do that." You know I think they have really become more involved as far as collaborators.

This heightened level of collaboration helped teachers see themselves as part of a cohesive community whose goal was to maximize its ability to meet the needs of all learners.

Teacher facilitators of the SAT teams went above and beyond to ensure parents were able to attend SAT meetings. They frequently communicated with parents through email to schedule and remind them about upcoming meetings about their children, in addition to sending the SAT invitation forms home through student folders a month prior to the meeting. Facilitators also promptly responded to any parents’ questions pertaining to the SAT process, Lucia, an SAT facilitator, and teacher of the gifted shared that keeping open lines of communication with parents helped support parent participation and attendance at SAT meetings. She explained:

Emailing the parents the Monday before. That’s, to me, a non-negotiable. Parents, yes, they’ve received the invitation, but typically, for me anyway, that happens a month ahead of time, because I’ve tried to get the calendar plan. Just keeping that communication open with the parents, that saves a lot of headaches. We know in advance if the parents are coming or not. If they forgot, they remember to come. Just sending an email. I do a lot of emails.

Gabrielle, the SAT coordinator and one of the four facilitators, attributed an uptick in parent attendance at SAT meetings due to the new level of communication from facilitators. She explained, “We're about 83% attendance for SAT meetings with parents,” which marked a huge
difference from the level of parent participation prior to the increased efforts to engage them in
the SAT process.

When parents could not attend a team meeting, facilitators scheduled the meeting on a
different day of the week to accommodate their availability. On occasion, teachers would
complain about having to come in on a different morning for an SAT meeting than usual, but this
was the expectation set by the administrators and SAT facilitators to underscore their
commitment to maintaining parents as key stakeholders, whose participation in meetings
regarding their child was essential.

As a byproduct of the RTI implementation process, a growing sense of shared ownership
by administrators and teachers for the success of all students became the norm. Reginald, a
veteran physical education teacher, saw SAT and CTT teams grow closer as they worked more
collaboratively to meet student learning needs. He felt that once teachers started working in
diverse teams, helping each other and focusing on students’ needs, they began to “have
ownership of all these kids.” Ana, a long-time special education teacher in the building, also saw
teachers across the school adopt a different viewpoint as they implemented RTI. Ownership
became more shared across grade levels and across the school, as RTI expectations for
supporting all students became engrained into the daily practices of CTT and SAT teams. She
stated:

We look at kids differently. Everybody looks at it as these are our kids, not your kids, my
kids, how can we get our kids, [Contigo] moved up. That’s the main impact on the school
culture, we look at children differently. Because everybody started taking ownership.

Fiona, the assistant principal, discussed how the mandated SAT changes engaged teachers in
student-related conversations, lessened isolation, and increased teacher collaboration, thereby
establishing the expectation that everyone was working together to address all students’ needs in SAT. She explained:

   It's opened up those conversations to the entire building. I think that it puts us all at a place where we're all working together. We're not isolated in our jobs, our assignments, our teams, our grade levels. We're all working together.

Through ongoing CTT and SAT meetings, teachers began to trust each other and collaborate more routinely.

   Participants shared that due to the focus on RTI across the school, teachers collaborated more often to address the instructional needs of students. George, the SEIL, felt that he saw more collaboration among teachers, especially given that they worked not only with other teachers from their grade level but across grade levels. He noted that this collaboration across grade levels facilitated improvements to instructional programs throughout the school. He explained:

   I think it has led to more collaboration among teachers. I think it’s led to the teachers asking and being aware of the importance of vertical articulation as well, vertical collaboration because they want to know are we doing what we need for this third grader to go into fourth. I think it has opened up better more collaboration.

Several participants explained that Dakota, the instructional coach, and SAT coordinator, guided them to ensure they were meeting the new expectations for targeting skills articulated within the SAT documentation and for monitoring the progress of these skills appropriately. These new collaborative interactions supported teachers’ instructional practices, as well as the implementation of RTI changes at the SAT level. As a former first-grade teacher and grade level chair, Emily reflected on her team’s work and shared that their increased collaboration and focus on students brought them closer. Emily noted that the expectations around RTI and supporting
all students pushed her team to work more closely and collaboratively on addressing the instructional needs of students in the whole grade. She described:

I think, and according to my last few years as a classroom teacher here, I think that we really pulled together as a grade level, even though we didn’t split up our kids. We were really sharing resources. And working together as a team to try to, say, you know, these, these are the common areas that all of these students need. What are some ideas that we could do? And we found ways that we were able to give small lessons. And then go to this group, give a small lesson and give this group and it was a lot of work on us. It was a lot of preparation, but we, it was better at meeting [our students’ needs].

Thus, teachers increasingly collaborated through professional conversations in CTTs and SAT around curriculum, instruction, and student needs.

In summary, teachers took greater ownership of students, while parents became more inclusive partners in addressing their child’s needs due to the facilitators’ communication efforts throughout the SAT process. Teachers also collaborated more frequently with one another through SAT, mixed and grade-level teams to support a range of learners in their classroom and across the school. These collective actions created behaviors and a belief system that all stakeholders, from parents to teachers, to administrators needed to work together for the benefit of the students.

**Leveraging Data Analysis and Progress Monitoring to Refine Instruction**

The third theme in response to the second research question is *Leveraging Data Analysis and Progress Monitoring to Refine Instruction*, which is defined as the utilization of insights from performance screenings, ongoing assessments, and progress reports to help inform day-to-day teaching strategies and the development of targeted, instructional interventions.
Administrators and teachers implemented changes to interventions and instruction based on ongoing student performance data, shifted their beliefs about data, and leveraged online assessment tools to track student progress. Participants explained that they continuously evaluated student performance and used data from these efforts to refine and inform decisions, such as deciding which interventions students should receive. Participants stated that data collection and data analysis were significant aspects of RTI in the school. Georgia explained that reflecting on her long tenure at the school and over a fifty-year career in education, she noticed that only in recent years had the use of data to inform instruction become such a strong focus for teachers and administrators. She stated:

I think it [RTI] has had a huge direct effect on data collection and the use of data. I’m not sure that I heard that word data much before RTI. But I think with RTI, data became very, very important to support what we’re doing. And because of that you know, the Istation, NWEA, all of those, what I call intermittent assessments, have been added.

Participants expressed that they constantly changed and adjusted instruction and interventions by monitoring student performance.

As noted previously, administrators and teachers implemented changes to interventions and instruction based on ongoing student performance data. As the RTI implementation process progressed, teachers increasingly leveraged student data to inform their instruction. For example, using monthly performance data from the Istation assessment, teachers adjusted and adapted their teaching practices so that students received appropriate instruction. Ana, a special education teacher, described how data directly guided teaching practices and that teachers altered their daily plans to ensure they addressed student learning gaps that were revealed through data analysis. She explained:
teachers are meeting daily, weekly, reviewing data. The data is directing their instruction
more now to where before … how do I want to put it, the teacher guide directed it. My
kids aren’t getting it, oh well, I got to move on. Well, now, it’s not, I got to move on, how
can I address the ones that aren’t getting it, I’m going to pull them over here, and I’m
going to do this while this group does that. That has really changed the way people teach.

From observations of SAT and CTT teams, the teams routinely analyzed student assessment data
during their meetings, where they looked at students’ progress and determined adjustments to
Tier 1B and Tier 2 interventions. Ella, a veteran kindergarten teacher, and grade level chair, saw
the impact of data on key RTI teams like CTTs, where the CTT meetings became completely
organized and focused on RTI, student growth, and data. Ella stated:

I feel like most of our CTTs are geared towards RTI. A lot of them are looking at the
data, which kids … it’s all always like, Okay, how are you challenging the high kids
because their growth is never as big as like let’s say a low kid. So, how are you going to
be challenging them to keep pushing them so their scores get higher? Then, looking at the
low kids, and then, “What are you doing to support them so that way they are
understanding the skills at your grade level?” So, all of our CTTs are based around data.
Okay, let’s look at Istation. “What are these scores at? Where’s their lowest score?” It’s
really delving deep into data and that driving your constructions. So a lot of it is, at the
kinder level, more Istation based, …, but it is looking at Istation and breaking apart the
different components of Istation. “Why is that child a tier-three? What’s their lowest
area? What’s hindering them?” Is it a processing issue?
As a result of the RTI implementation, administrators and teachers leveraged CTT and SAT meetings as an opportunity to review and analyze the data that informed and guided instruction and interventions for students in need of Tier 1B and Tier 2 supports.

Teachers' and administrators’ beliefs around data shifted. Participants expressed that initial assessments, like the revised NWEA in grades 3 – 12, did not always match their students’ performance in the classroom and that this created some teacher distrust around the accuracy of data derived from these assessments. Emily, a former first-grade teacher and educational technology specialist, described the alignment and adjustments with the various assessments to instruction:

And to be honest, we didn’t feel like the assessments that we were giving our students matched what we needed for instruction. So we did not see a strong connection between the assessments and instruction. We were getting completely different information from what they were able to do in the classroom to what that test said they should be able to do. It’s not as bad [with the new assessments]. And NWEA has made a lot of adjustments. They tried to align it a little bit more. And then Istation, I don’t have practice as a classroom teacher using it, so I’m going on what I hear, but there is still a little bit of a discrepancy. But it’s not as what it used to be. Teachers saying they are seeing it as more useful.

As both assessments and Tier I curricula were aligned to CCSS with the introduction of RTI, teachers began to notice that students’ classroom performance and assessment results were more congruent. With this change, teachers’ confidence in utilizing results from these assessments also increased. Thus, over time, participants’ attitudes regarding student performance data changed from not trusting the assessments to believing the new assessments accurately reflected the
student learning and performance that teachers saw in the classroom. Maggie, a veteran fourth-grade teacher, asserted that teachers believed data from the latest version of NWEA, which served as a universal screener, provided an accurate view of a student’s current academic standing. Additionally, progress monitoring assessments, e.g., Istation, helped teachers stay on top of whether a student was meeting a targeted standard. Maggie explained:

I think the tiered instruction has given RTI a starting point to know where to work from. It helps you to find a place where does this child belong in here. The progress monitoring helps you to stay on top of it, whether they’re meeting the standards. As far as universal screening, as far as the NWEA, I think that that’s a good thing, and I think it’s good data, that I see personally that correlates with what I see in the classroom.

As the new and improved assessments also provided more immediate feedback, they offered teachers more practical benefits than the one-time assessments, such as the PARCC test, given at the end of the year. The PARCC assessment identified curriculum issues a year after the students had moved on to the next grade level, whereas the ongoing assessments teachers gave multiple times throughout the year, provided more useful, accurate, and meaningful student performance data that could be leveraged to promote student growth in a more timely manner. Isla, a veteran first-grade teacher, stated the differences she saw across the assessments:

Istation provides the instant feedback, which I like. I can see that they’re making progress or not. But I actually prefer NWEA in some ways because it’s beginning of the year, mid, and end. Whereas PARCC is just end of the year, and you’re so disconnected from the results.
Teachers’ perceptions around data changed from that of distrust to that of trust, and they began to incorporate assessment results into their daily teaching practices to make informed decisions around instruction and student interventions.

Online assessment tools related to NWEA and Istation also made it easier for teachers and administrators to access assessment results and monitor student progress online. These assessments provided a detailed and historical recording of students’ performance and also broke down results into specific content and skill areas, which helped teachers identify academic weaknesses in need of improvement. Victoria, a third-grade teacher, described how Istation provided reading analysis that made instructional decisions like creating intervention groups easier for her. She explained that the assessment provided intervention suggestions and identified the relative strengths and weaknesses of students’ specific reading skills. She further stated that she had access to Istation’s recommendations for reading intervention lessons and that progress on these could then be monitored through the tool. When discussing Istation reading, Victoria stated, “It does break it down with four subcategories for third grade, so I think it does make it a little bit easier than just pulling something out of a hat. Trying to figure out, okay, I need this skill. Istation does make it easy.” Teachers also found the visual representation of individual student’s performance through graphs and charts particularly helpful for identifying both areas of student growth and those that remained lagging. Isla, a first-grade teacher, explained:

I think [data-based decision making has changed in CTTs by] recording it more.

Recording the information and using ... I think technology has evolved over time. Now it’s more of a putting it into graphs so that you have that visual, and you can see it easily using those numbers. Really having that, so that you have, like in the past, you might have recorded it, but you didn’t have it lined up. We’re now on a computer screen, you
can see, wow, look what happened in August and now look at what’s happening in December, and look at it in April. You can visually see that very, very easily, and I just think recording has changed in terms of always having it updated and constantly in front of you to keep moving forward.

Teachers and administrators noted that the availability of data and the resulting ability to analyze student performance over time improved during the implementation of RTI due to the incorporation of these online tools. From field notes and observations, it is evident that administrators and teachers consistently analyzed student performance. They looked for students falling through the cracks or in need of further intervention to address a skill’s gap. Gabrielle, the SAT coordinator, and reading interventionist, explained, “There are more eyes on data, because the assessment results became instantly uploaded and viewable once students completed an assessment, to the classroom teachers, SAT coordinators, instructional coaches, and administration.” She felt the key to leveraging student performance data was consistently using it during CTT team meetings with administration and during SAT team meetings because they helped ensure students got what they needed academically.

In summary, teachers’ and administrators used performance data to adjust interventions and daily instruction during RTI implementation. Despite some initial hesitation, teachers learned to trust data and rely on it to inform their instructional practices. Teachers also found that using technology to access online assessment data made it possible for them to make just-in-time decisions to refine their instruction and target students’ skill gaps.

Section Summary

This section described three themes related to the impact RTI had on teaching practices in an elementary school: 1) individualizing instruction, 2) improving cooperation across
stakeholders, and 3) leveraging data analysis and progress monitoring to refine instruction. While each theme is presented separately, they are in practice, interconnected, and collectively supported the implementation of a dynamic, integrated RTI framework. Participants richly articulated how RTI impacted teaching practices through the combination of a shift to more individualized instruction, increased collaboration among stakeholders, the routine use of data and the integration of technology.

**RTI’s Influence on Leadership Practices**

The third research question asked how implementation of an integrated RTI framework changed leadership practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico? Three themes were identified in response to this question: 1) providing a unified vision for school improvement; 2) developing a culture of support, and 3) restructuring personnel. The following sections describe how the implementation of an integrated RTI model impacted leadership practices, specifically school improvement, culture, and personnel.

**Providing a Unified Vision for School Improvement**

The first theme is *Providing a Unifying Vision for School Improvement* by leaders in the school. This theme is defined as administrators clearly communicating and enforcing the required practices they deemed necessary for achieving their visualization of a successful RTI implementation. Administrators guided staff to focus their efforts on student growth and learning outcomes, enforced teacher accountability for RTI processes and established new RTI expectations for teachers. An example of the theme from Ivy is illustrated by her comment about RTI’s influence throughout the school:

I just think it [RTI] made us more focused. We have to capture refining, refining, refining, why we're here and what our purpose is, and how we can best meet the needs of
not only our students but our staff. So, I think that has become a huge, huge change and
shift.

Administrators sought to define the school vision of improvement to include a broad range of
learners.

With the implementation of RTI, the administration expanded the vision for school
improvement to include both student proficiency and student growth for all types of learners. Ivy
described how “one of the biggest differences” for her in her time working in the building for
over thirty years has been the shift from focusing on low achieving students to a much broader
collection discussion throughout the building about how to meet the needs of the low, middle, and high
achieving students. To address student proficiency and growth rates, the administration
mandated early morning CTTs with grade-level teachers to focus on RTI and the needs of all
groups of students. In the monthly CTT meetings with administration, students’ growth rates
were reviewed through progress monitoring data aggregated by grade level. Teachers also
selected lessons for intervention from Istation for Tier 1B and Tier 2 students. With all the
changes to RTI processes in SAT and CTTs, Fiona, the assistant principal, explained that there
was now “a clear focus for the SAT. There’s a clear focus for CTTs.” In short, the administration
clarified the purpose and vision for these two integral RTI teams by laser focusing them on the
growth of all learners.

Administrators required teachers to be accountable for supporting and monitoring all
students in their classrooms. Ella, a kindergarten grade-level chair, explained that with RTI
implementation, the requirement for teachers to be accountable for documenting and
communicating students’ performance to administration, and schoolwide teams increased.
Several participants noted that administration, CTTs, SAT, and IEP teams increasingly relied on
general classroom teachers to provide them with updated student performance data from assessments and progress monitoring efforts. Ella described how the increased accountability required by the administration as part of the RTI implementation meant that weekly student interventions had to be incorporated into teachers’ schedules, and student growth had to be routinely monitored in CTT meetings so that all general education teachers had to be on an SAT team. These RTI-related changes created more accountability for teachers and allowed them to demonstrate that they were meeting students’ needs. Ella, a veteran kindergarten teacher, explained:

I think for me, with RTI changing is accountability. Back in the day, there really wasn't like the documentation of how you have to do RTI. But now, you're held accountable, which I think is good because you really do have to push yourself to find that time to be able to pull those kids to meet their needs. So, I think that's what made it successful for me is you are held accountable for it, and then you have to prove how you're accountable for it. So, you're accountable to, for RTI, for administration, you have to … and also with the SAT Process, too. I mean, you have your progress monitoring sheets that you have to fill out, so you're accountable in different ways. I mean, you have to show, on your schedule, you have to show the documentation to administration. How are you doing, RTI? You know you have your kids' names, what things you have done with them, and then with the SAT Process, too, with the progress monitoring sheets, that are also showing the RTI that you've done to meet their needs for their SATs or IEPs.

Gabrielle, the SAT coordinator, and reading interventionist, explained how the administration’s focus on the new SAT structure and morning CTTs, helped classroom teachers feel more accountable as well as more efficacious, as if, “I got to do something for the struggling kids. I
can't just move them along and do nothing.” The changes to the SAT process and structure promoted greater teacher accountability for meeting students’ learning needs.

As part of the RTI implementation efforts, the administration established a new, monthly morning CTT meeting with clear expectations. More specifically, Emily, the technology integration specialist and former grade level chair, stated that administration specified that the new morning CTT meetings with administration and teachers should be focused solely on student performance data and RTI. She explained:

I feel that they have. And I know the administration is very adamant that the morning CTTs that they have once a month is purely discussions on RTI and data, and where we are going. And what do we need to do. And I know that that’s been a big change because it wasn’t always an expectation that that’s what we were doing in the morning.

Isla, a veteran first-grade teacher, indicated that CTTs evolved overtime as administration provided more clarity on what the key questions were when discussing student performance. Additionally, the administration made clear their expectations that through the CTT process, teachers would discuss how grade-level teams would address student academic and behavioral gaps. She explained:

I think they’ve [CTTs] evolved as well. I think our administration has given us more direction, with CTT’s. It has helped with that RTI process in terms of, now our CTTs are centered on data. In looking at data, in looking at your students and what are your students doing? What are areas of strength? What are the areas that you want to continue to work on? I think in the past, CTTs were again all over the place.

In observations of CTTs meetings with administration, I saw several meetings centered on multiple measures of student performance data and RTI intervention conversations focused on
student’s individual needs, which confirmed the teachers’ claims and perceptions. Through CTTs, teachers engaged in RTI-related conversations that centered on student performance and how grade-level teams could be most efficacious in supporting students.

In summary, as part of the RTI implementation process, the administration provided a clear focus for teachers to target growth and optimal learning outcomes for all students. Administrators also increased teacher accountability for RTI supports, interventions, and documentation and tied these requirements to new RTI expectations, such as mandated teacher participation on CTTs and SAT teams.

**Developing a Culture of Support**

The second theme pertains to *Developing a Culture of Support*, which is defined as broad-based cooperation for teachers from administrators, their peers, and outside experts. Teachers experienced administrators as supportive, administrators saw their role as a support to teachers, teachers supported each other, and teachers utilized district data, as well as curriculum experts, to support RTI implementation efforts. A representative quote from Emily, a technology integration specialist, and former grade level chair, illustrated how teachers felt about the important role administrators played in supporting teachers: “I think without administration supporting us, we wouldn't go anywhere.” Participants felt that administrators supported their work and saw them as key stakeholders in the RTI implementation.

Teachers experienced administrators as supportive of their RTI implementation efforts. For example, Georgia, a longtime guidance counselor, noted that Amelia the principal nurtured buy-in from both veteran and new teachers through ongoing communication with SAT teams and through one-on-one conversations with staff. Amelia relied heavily on the relationships she had built over time with veteran teachers as well as those she nurtured with the new teachers she had
hired during her tenure as principal. As a result, Amelia was tuned into the pulse of the building and inherently knew how to push the teachers. Georgia explained

I think administrative support and buy-in has been very important. … I think that's been really instrumental in its success because she [the principal] has provided a consistency that the professionals here appreciate. I think it's just pervasive.

Maggie, a fourth-grade teacher and grade level chair, stated that the fourth-grade team felt the administration’s support was essential for all the changes they instituted as a team to implement a new grade level RTI model. Maggie explained that Amelia, the principal, trusted and empowered teachers to be innovative with their instructional practices. For example, the fourth-grade team instituted a new RTI approach during intervention/enrichment, where they grouped students by skill level across the grade. This effort was developed and implemented with Amelia’s input and support. Maggie felt that Amelia encouraged the teachers to make adaptations and adjustments to their strategies, as they sought to find the best approaches to meet students' learning needs. She explained:

The number one key relationship that makes it the implementation of it so important is our principal. Mrs. Amelia has been on board from day one. She was thrilled that we wanted to try the new model. She was excited about it. Every time we've made a change, we'd go to her, and we said, okay, we're going to change it to this. And she listens, and she says, "Okay." And she says, "Let me know how it goes." And she really has been through that process and gets it, but sometimes you try something, and it's not working, and you need to fix it.

Ivy, a veteran second-grade teacher, also emphasized the support she experienced from the administration by their attendance at meetings pertaining to RTI implementation, like new RTI
processes, assessments, standards, and curriculum. She went on to say that by the administration's willingness to admit that, alongside teachers, they too were learning how best to implement RTI, she felt unafraid to make the mistakes that often accompany the experience of employing a new process. In all of the ways described previously, participants felt supported by the administration, as they progressed through the RTI implementation process.

Administrators also perceived themselves to be supportive of teachers throughout the RTI implementation process. Fiona explained that she believed her role as an administrator was essentially to support and guide teachers so that they could successfully fulfill their role as instructors. She stated,

As an administrator, I think that one of our biggest job is to support teachers. Our job is to make the information, the data clear. Our job is to provide time for them to get together with their teams for CTT. When their screenings and their Universal Screenings and information do come out, it’s our job to have the coach work with their teams to understand all that because I think if we don’t, then that’s where we fail teachers. That’s my job as an administrator.

Amelia, the principal, asserted that she and the rest of her administrative team worked hard to support teachers and provide them with the necessary resources and time to successfully implement RTI. Amelia stated that she especially focused on areas that addressed instructional improvement in Tier 1 and Tier 2. For example, she supported the refinement of PBIS in Tier 1 and teachers’ identification of interventions for students needing Tier 2 supports. Amelia felt that her role as principal was to work with teachers and teams to help them learn and grow as professionals while finding ways to improve student learning and achieve schoolwide goals. She described her work teachers related to the PBIS efforts and other initiatives as:
We're also there to help support them, and so when they come up with an idea, "what if and can I have this resource?" Well, then that's my job, right. That's my job to see if it's a worthwhile resource.

As noted previously, one way in which the administration supported teachers was their endorsement of the Lighthouse committee’s work, which sought to implement a new schoolwide PBIS system based on the *Seven Habits of Happy Kids*. Amelia provided substitutes so the teachers on the committee could visit other local schools where the program was being implemented, thereby making it easier for them to envision how they would implement the model at Contigo Elementary School. Subsequent to these visits, Amelia and Lighthouse committee teachers created a list of ideas to begin implementation of the program and a timeline for rolling it out. In addition, Amelia supported the new PBIS by providing requisite funding to institute various aspects of the program and by ensuring the main office staff remembered to highlight student accomplishments routinely. She also enlisted the support of the custodian to place the key habit of the month on the marque outside the building, so teachers, families, and students all knew the intended focus for the month. Specifically, Amelia noted that she supported the Lighthouse teachers’ suggestion to let students know:

You were a good leader to help that child, and your friend wasn't left by himself on the playground. Things like that. So then we acknowledge that behavior. The child brings the ticket up, puts their name and their teacher on the ticket, puts it in one of the buckets, and then that first day of the week their name is announced. So we have two from every grade level. And then they come down. They get lanyards with their tickets, and they hand out tickets as well.
Publicizing and openly supporting the new PBIS process through daily announcements, the school marquee, and student recognition by the main office staff, showed Amelia’s support for what teachers on the Lighthouse Committee put into place.

In addition to support from administration, teachers throughout the building began supporting each other in new ways in the service of successfully implementing RTI practices and processes. For example, George, the special education instructional leader, supported RTI efforts by collaborating closely with the SAT coordinators, attending numerous SAT meetings, and being a part of the new Lighthouse Committee, which targeted Tier 1 student behaviors. In the past, special education teachers only dealt with Tier 3 students and did not collaborate with general education teachers on Tier 1 or Tier 2 students. From field notes and observations, it was evident that George interacted and consulted on students’ needs with the SAT coordinators and as an SAT team member, when prudent. Additionally, George stepped in to help craft behavior plans with one of the SAT coordinators for SAT students when her student workload increased, and she needed help. George explained that he worked closely with the SAT coordinators and served on the Lighthouse committee because he felt it was important for regular and special education teachers to work collaboratively together. He explained,

Again I try to work closely with the student assistance team coordinator. What the teachers and the other SAT facilitators know that I'm available for SAT meetings as just general team member, or as an admin rep, whichever they would like me to play to give my input. I try to be as active hands-on with the SAT process as possible because the key to RTI is to service the kids in General Education without having them identified going through Special Education. I feel like the earlier I can work with the teachers and the SAT people, not just to hone in on the process, but to actually be a part of it, support
them. I want them to see me as a support as well. I've helped draft numerous FBAs and BIPs for students that aren't on the Special Ed caseload. Just trying to be that support for them. Part of the PBS, I am on the Lighthouse team trying to help implement that systematic change of reduced discipline problems and things like that.

Additionally, the newly constructed SAT teams brought teachers across grade levels together to share best teaching practices, interventions, and support strategies for managing challenging students. Ella described how the new SAT team structure encouraged teachers to be more collaborative and supportive of each other in the mixed-grade-level SAT model. She stated

I think the new SAT structure, I think, is all right. I mean, it's good to be on a team of people. I mean, there's a lot of meetings that go behind it, but I feel like all of us have a better understanding of the SAT process. Because even though you may not personally have kids on SAT, you're sitting in a meeting with other teachers on SAT and you can give your knowledge of okay, when you do have kids on SAT that may be in like third grade, but they're functioning at a kindergarten level, you have that input of but, I think you have that input to be able to say, “Okay, well try this intervention with them. This might work to get them to improve.” So, I think I mean it's good to see school-wide where kids are in the SAT process.

Gabrielle further described how teachers began to support each other in the new SAT teams by being open to sharing ideas, as well as being vulnerable and admitting they sometimes needed help with challenging students. She stated, “You're vulnerable in front of your colleagues because you trust them. They [say] ‘I really don't know what to do for this kid" instead of ‘I tried everything, and it's not working.’” Moreover, special education teachers supported general education teachers through implementation changes and became more involved in RTI processes.
when appropriate. General education teachers expanded their support and responsibilities for key processes like the SAT, which were formerly more within the sole purview of only a few general education teachers.

Contigo teachers and administrators collaborated with district administrators, as well as curriculum and data specialists to receive instructional support related to RTI processes and programming. For example, the district research and data administrator came to the Contigo Elementary School for a professional development day to guide grade-level teams of teachers and administrators through the process of analyzing school-wide and grade-level data. Another component of the training was to help identify the schoolwide instructional goals to be included in the school improvement plan articulated in NM DASH. Several participants shared that time to meet in teams and with experts helped them make sense of RTI. During the training, general education teachers were also allotted time to collaborate with one another and develop appropriate instructional adjustments for students based on what the experts suggested. Ana stated that the experts’ modeled best practices related to interpreting data at various grade levels. She saw teachers’ data analysis skills improve each year due to the expert training received and the subsequent grade-level work completed in CTTs. Ana explained,

I think how it started, it started through the administration, bringing in people to train us on how to read data, number one, what does it look like, where can you go to get the resources? Like for instance, NWEA has a section there that if your child is falling in this area, you can go over here, and it’ll give you examples of this is what they need to start learning. You need to start working with them in order to move them to the next level. Just having that time to get the specific training and the time to get in there and play with it was very helpful. Number two, the admin giving the grade levels an opportunity to
meet with each other, our days are so crazy that they have allowed us to, “Okay, on
Wednesday from, whatever two to three, we need grades one and two to work together
today,” or whatever. Just talking and knowing where those kids either came from or
going to has also helped. Every year, it just seems like it gets better and better because
we’re starting to see the positive effects of it, and more and more people are buying into it
and seeing what each grade level has to do.

Observations at the site level indicated teachers and building administrators sought collaboration
with district personnel to support them with RTI related practices, such as data analysis and
school improvement. Kindergarten – 3rd grade teachers, principals, instructional coaches, and
reading specialists leveraged the training they received over multiple years from an expert in the
field provided by the district on best reading instructional practices. Gabrielle, a Contigo reading
interventionist with over ten years of experience teaching at the primary grade level in the
district, described the expert’s work and how impactful it had been for teachers and for her:

Dr. Fierro, who's passionate and extremely knowledgeable and explained like the
background, which was just eye-opening too, to me. And I've taught primary grades but
the whole reading process and how our brain works. And so, he had many sessions over
the summer and just building on the knowledge giving us a lot of like college-level
information. And so that gave us a lot of tools to use as instructors and then they brought
on this year to teach the primary grades the same background knowledge. He's like it's
not the materials. The materials are good. They're a resource, but an informed teacher is
key.

Through RTI implementation, administrators and teachers utilized outside experts to help refine
and guide their RTI processes and instructional practices.
In summary, teachers noted the importance of the support given to them by administrators to successfully implement RTI processes and new practices. Administrators also acknowledged their commitment to support teachers throughout RTI implementation. A byproduct of the changes to the SAT and CTT structures facilitated greater support among teachers across grade levels and roles. Lastly, teachers relied heavily on district data and curriculum experts to help them improve their ability to meet the diverse learning needs of students.

**Restructuring Personnel**

The third theme that emerged in response to the third research question was *Restructuring Personnel*, which is defined as designing and implementing a staffing plan that maximally leveraged the skills and people needed to implement RTI successfully. The administration hired key teachers to implement and lead new RTI processes that affected changes in teacher roles and responsibilities related to RTI implementation and found ways to compensate for the negative impact of limited school resources on instruction and collaboration. A representative quote describing key individuals who were hired to support teachers, so they could better serve students’ learning needs came from Georgia, who described the impact of two key hires in the building who were responsible for leading specific RTI change efforts:

I think that both of those people, the reading interventionist and instructional coach, have been able to work with all of the staff, not just the classroom teacher, but the support staff too, to see how we can better serve these kids, and make sure that we're doing everything we possibly can, to intervene, and give those kids those opportunities to be successful. So, I think it's been a tremendous addition to the staff.
Participants saw the hiring of the reading interventionist and the instructional coach as essential to a successful RTI implementation.

The immense leadership responsibilities related to SAT and other newly required RTI processes undertaken by Gabrielle, the reading interventionist, and Dakota, the instructional coach, significantly impacted the success of RTI implementation in the school. Fiona, the assistant principal, described the incredible work completed in just two years by Dakota and Gabrielle as:

I have watched Dakota come in these two years. She has built some very solid relationships with all teams and all teachers. Her work is invaluable. Her support to teachers, she will do anything they ask. She will create materials. She will model lessons. She will support them with data. She will pull data. She will sit down with them one on one. She will attend team meetings. I think that without Dakota, we wouldn’t be where we are… I think Gabrielle also… [SAT team members] They had to meet, they had to progress monitor, they had to look at the proof. Gabrielle had a very tough first year, and she’s really, really worked hard to make that [SAT] great for the teachers … Good hires, two of them.

Participants stated that Gabrielle was especially instrumental in the successful implementation of the new SAT process in the school. Due to Gabrielle’s prior experience at her former school with the SAT structure that was to be implemented and its accompanying processes, she anticipated many teachers’ concerns and was able to address these readily. For example, Lucia shared that Gabrielle calmed teachers’ fears about all of the ‘unknowns’ related to the changes in the SAT by providing a highly organized system for implementing these changes. She explained:
I think Ms. Gabrielle has been key [for SAT]. I think she’s the glue that has held everything together. Yeah, I think the fact that she brought in this system and went through it with us when it very first started and helped dispel a lot of the fear and the, “What?” And her organization. I just think she was really key in making this successful. Without her, I’m not sure that it would’ve been successful at this point.

Based on participant input, the leadership exhibited by the new hires in assisting teachers in adapting to the updated RTI processes in SAT helped teachers successfully implement the RTI changes that benefitted students.

Leadership roles and responsibilities for new SAT coordinators changed with the implementation of RTI. Administration redistributed SAT responsibilities so that instead of belonging to a few teachers, they were now owned by all general education teachers. More specifically, all general education teachers now served on an SAT team along with coordinators and facilitators in order to meet the needs of all students requiring Tier 2 supports. While all general education teachers were now required to be part of an SAT team, Amelia, the principal, intentionally protected grade-level-general-education teachers from the time-consuming work of coordinating and facilitating these meetings, especially given that they were also being tasked during this time with learning to use a new reading program. Instead, experienced, non-grade-level, general education teachers such as the librarian, reading interventionist, teacher of the gifted, and instructional coach, were tasked with SAT coordinating and facilitating duties. These new facilitators and coordinators also worked to ensure a smooth transition for teachers who newly became full-time members of SAT teams by addressing any concerns, fears, or questions they had about the new SAT structure. As she reflected on the RTI implementation, Lucia, one of the new facilitators, described how she believed the SAT changes, in particular, promoted a
more distributed leadership model. Lucia explained: “There’s more leadership amongst the staff, whereas before it fell on one or two people, burn them out, overwhelm them. Now the way we’re doing it, I think, is so much better.”

With the implementation of RTI, administrators began to see their role as one in which they facilitated, connected and guided teachers in developing their instructional practices at a high level. Administrators shifted the day-to-day instructional leadership responsibilities to Dakota, the instructional coach. As the instructional coach, Dakota engaged in direct conversations with individual teachers on student performance, data analysis and matching interventions to targeted skill deficits. Dakota was also responsible for facilitating teacher professional development related to curriculum and instruction alignment between the reading program and supplemental materials. She modeled instructional practices by demonstrating for teachers with actual students how best to implement the new curriculum programs and supplemental materials. Fiona described the instructional leadership shift to Dakota in this manner:

I think that our role, we [administration] kind of have taken a backseat to that curriculum and instruction because we have these experts within our district, and I don’t feel like I’m an expert in the math. I don’t think Amelia feels that way. Amelia actually only taught middle school. She doesn’t have a lot of elementary teaching experience, but I think our role is different in this district because we have a tremendous amount of support. We have an instructional coach on staff. They take more of that lead of working with teachers and helping them hone and refine their instruction and even model lessons for them. I think our role has changed. That was expected of us years ago.
The observations of professional development meetings with primary grade levels and the instructional coach confirmed that the instructional coach took on the responsibility of supporting teachers with new instructional strategies and the Heggerty curriculum program, data, and curriculum alignment. As part of the RTI implementation process, teacher roles and responsibilities changed in a manner that fostered a sense of shared ownership for student learning outcomes across the school.

During the 2017 – 2018 school year, budget cuts limited available resources and support for at-risk students in general, as well as special education. These cuts necessitated an increase in the support provided to students by grade-level teachers. For example, several general education teachers were tasked with supporting five unanticipated residential placements in their classrooms, given that a full-inclusion model was not available. Ella stated that while grade-level teachers stepped up to support special education students in response to the limited resources, the general consensus was that it was a challenge to meet the needs of all students given the budget cuts and the elimination of the full inclusion special education model that had been used in the school for years. Ella explained:

I feel like the support isn't all there, especially in special ed. It's not to say that it's like our school's fault, but it's I mean monetarily they don't have the funds to have [full inclusion]… If we could, there would be a special education teacher at all grade levels. Yeah, and there isn't, and so it's like how are you meeting those needs? So, I feel like everybody's spread really thin, and that's hard because you do have kids that have a lot of needs, but all their needs are not getting met. So, as a general education teacher, you're trying to fill in those gaps to meet their needs. I mean, you may be the only safe place they have.
Under the previous full inclusion model, special education teachers could be more of a resource to their colleagues as they frequently met with their grade level team, because they rarely had time conflicts for their grade level meeting. Due to the budget cuts, special education teachers supported multiple-grade levels, which impacted their time for collaboration with their colleagues since all grade-level meetings took place at the same time on Wednesdays. Gabrielle, the reading interventionist and SAT coordinator, noted that the teaching staff’s ability to provide Tier 2 direct reading intervention was also negatively impacted by the previous year’s budget cuts, which resulted in the school going from having two reading intervention teachers to one. She stated, “Last year, we had two, and this year it's just me. Budget. I think the budget. Yeah. Every school lost one reading interventionist.” With the loss of the second reading teacher, the burden to provide reading support Tier 2 students were limited to the one reading interventionist and those grade-level teachers who felt comfortable providing the necessary targeted reading instruction. Several grade-level teachers stepped up and provided reading as well as socio-emotional support for at-risk students in response to the challenge of losing support personnel.

In summary, teachers’ roles and responsibilities shifted with the implementation of RTI. To accommodate new instructional and administrative demands related to RTI, two key personnel were hired, who participants found indispensable to successfully implementing RTI-related changes. Despite these additional support personnel, unexpected circumstances related to a budget shortfall meant that the elementary school was short one special education teacher and one reading interventionist. These conditions created an extra burden on general-education teachers and on administrators, which made it difficult to provide the level of academic and socio-emotional support needed to address the needs of a challenging group of students.
Section Summary

The study found three themes describing the impact RTI had on leadership practices in an elementary school: 1) providing a unified vision for school improvement, 2) developing a culture of support, and 3) restructuring personnel. The administration made leadership decisions that fostered their vision of supporting growth and positive learning outcomes for all students through RTI. Leadership decisions such as the mandated new SAT structure, as well as the morning CTT meetings with administration, prioritized conversations related to RTI and established new expectations of teachers. By engaging all professional staff in these new teams, administrators developed a system of support to address the needs of all students in RTI. Participants also expressed a willingness to work together to support students despite the increased burden to do so brought about by budget cuts.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the three research questions used to guide the qualitative study of RTI implementation. The first question focused on how participants experienced RTI implementation at an urban elementary school in New Mexico. In answering the first research question, the narrative section detailed the complexity of an integrated RTI model focused on academics and behaviors. The phases of implementation, as discussed by participants, described the evolution of curricula, school teams, and RTI processes.

The second research question focused on how RTI impacted participants’ teaching practices. Participants shared how they individualized instruction to target students’ specific needs. New technologies also supported teachers’ instructional efforts to differentiate students’ learning experiences. RTI-related changes impacted curricula and the assessment tools used by all teachers and administrators. The new assessment tools for progress monitoring and universal
screenings evolved to become easier to administer and allowed for more accessibility to performance data. The CTTs and SAT teams used these data to help prioritize students in need of support and to determine targeted instructional practices for these at-risk students.

The third research question focused on the impact RTI had on leadership practices. The administration provided a vision of school improvement that prioritized changes in RTI practices and processes. Participants described support from the administration as a key element of successfully implementing an integrated RTI framework. Participants expressed that the expectation that teachers collaborate with one another through their participation in SAT teams and on CTTs had become part of the new culture of support that had emerged since implementing RTI. This increased collaboration between general and special education teachers, as well as the restructuring of teachers’ roles and responsibilities combined to facilitate a successful RTI implementation. Budget cuts in the 2017 – 2018 school year limited resources and negatively impacted the school’s ability to implement Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction in the manner they had in previous years. In response, grade-level general education teachers worked more closely with the at-risk students in their classrooms.

The following chapter discusses the conclusions of the study, implications of practice, and my concluding thoughts for the study.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the impact of the implementation of a multi-tiered RTI system in an urban elementary school in New Mexico. This research provided a more advanced view of RTI implementation. The following research questions reflect these implementation issues:

1. How did an urban elementary school in New Mexico implement an integrated RTI model?
2. How did the implementation of the integrated model of RTI change teaching practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?
3. How did implementation of an integrated RTI framework change leadership practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?

This research captured an in-depth view of the implementation of an integrated Response to Intervention (RTI) model within an elementary school located in New Mexico. The study examined implementation five-years beyond its initial introduction to the school using a qualitative case study that explored the perspectives of teachers and administrators. The researcher gathered data through interviews, focus groups, observations (e.g., SAT; CTTs; and professional development), field notes and a review of historical documents.

Purposive sampling was employed to identify a diverse group of 16 teachers and administrators from whom data were collected. The purpose of this study was to understand how an integrated RTI model changed the teaching practices, leadership, and organizational behaviors in an urban elementary school in New Mexico. Each research question was designed to explore how the implementation of an integrated RTI model affected school administration and teaching practices. These questions were guided by two conceptual frameworks: Stages of
Change/Learning (Schein, 1996) and Interactive Factors Affecting Implementation (Fullan, 2007b).

This chapter provides a discussion of the conclusions drawn from the findings described in chapter four. Six findings emerged from the second and third research questions, which served to inform the study’s four conclusions. Following a discussion of the conclusions, implications for best practices related to RTI implementation will be outlined. Recommendations for future research will also be presented as well as a description of the limitations of the study. The final section of the chapter will offer the researcher’s concluding thoughts regarding this study.

Conclusions and Discussion

The following four conclusions drawn from this qualitative case study were derived from participants’ self-described experiences of implementing an integrated RTI framework as well as the observations and field notes of this researcher. Specifically, successful RTI implementation entailed the following instructional and organizational changes:

1. RTI prompted an increase in individualized instruction, which required a change in teaching mindset;

2. Fundamental communication pathways and team structures were altered, resulting in greater collaboration across stakeholders;

3. Teachers became more evidence-based and data-driven in their thinking and practice; and,

4. The school developed a heightened sense of internal accountability.

As discussed in the following sections, each conclusion acknowledges or extends the existing scholarly work related to educational leadership and RTI implementation.
Conclusion One: RTI Prompted an Increase in Individualized Instruction, which Required a Change in Teaching Mindset

Effective teaching in the context of RTI necessitates individualizing instruction, which required a change in a teaching mindset. To become better at individualizing instruction, teachers often need to identify and change their preconceptions regarding how best to facilitate individual versus group-level, student learning. Additionally, in order to learn new strategies for developing and implementing tailored instruction and for thinking through how best to meet the diverse needs of their students, teachers require designated blocks of time in their day for these tasks (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Grimaldi & Roberts, 2011; Reddy et al., 2016). Fullan (2007b) supported this view with his assertion that if teachers were to be effective in implementing a new educational initiative, their leaders must create and implement an infrastructure and processes that provide opportunities for them to gain a deeper understanding of new teaching practices.

To change their instructional practices, teachers need to understand the difference between differentiated instruction and interventions that target student skill deficits. Stahl (2016) found that a lack of teacher clarity regarding the distinction between differentiated instruction at the classroom level and instructional interventions at the individual student level, across 1300 elementary schools that implemented RTI, resulted in students not receiving appropriate interventions to remediate their skill deficits. This issue did not emerge in the findings from the current study, which is most likely attributable to the fact that teachers and administrators worked together in CTT and SAT teams to clarify and gain a deeper understanding of the nuances associated with implementing tiered instruction.
The allocation of designated time to work through how best to support Tier I and II students is another key practice that changed with the implementation of RTI. This shift resulted in teachers having an improved ability to adjust and individualize their existing instructional practices. Meyer and Behar-Horenstein (2015) studied first-grade teachers’ responses to RTI during its second year of implementation and found that while they had a desire to learn RTI and alter their instructional practices, they were frustrated by the lack of time allocated to team conversations and professional development regarding practices for individualizing instruction. In the current study, teachers discussed the value of successfully implementing RTI and having time with their peers to learn how to adjust instructional practices to the individual needs of students. They also acknowledged the importance of receiving professional development from an external reading expert. The findings from this study regarding the importance of teachers having time to reflect on which instructional practices best support students’ individual learning needs echo those found in the RTI literature (e.g., Meyer & Behar-Horenstein, 2015; Wilcox & Murakami-Ramlho, 2013). While participants’ in this study experienced frustration at times during RTI implementation, they stated that having ongoing, scheduled CTT meetings together with targeted professional development enabled them to change their approach to teaching toward one that was more individualized.

Fullan’s (2007b) Interactive Factors Affecting Implementation Framework asserts that local and external factors impact the success of comprehensive educational initiatives within a school. One of the local factors that Fullan (2007b) highlights as essential to successfully implementing an educational change initiative is the provision of a safe space for teachers to acquire the new knowledge and skills associated with the proposed reform. In the current study, teachers in part attributed their ability to effectively change their instructional practices to having
a safe space during SAT and CTT meetings to take risks, ask questions and experiment with new instructional strategies without fear of negative repercussions.

**Conclusion Two: Fundamental Communication Pathways and Team Structures were Altered, Resulting in Greater Collaboration Across Stakeholders**

Increased collaboration among stakeholders, facilitated by school leaders’ strong systems perspective and sense of humility as well as altered team structures and communication pathways, was a fundamental change that enabled the successful implementation of RTI. Prior to RTI, collaboration was not extensively employed as a professional development practice within the school. In the current study, collaboration was largely facilitated by the principal’s vision, her use of second-change facilitators to implementing a new SAT team structure, and by a shift in the school culture to one of shared ownership among staff and teachers for the learning outcomes of all students. School administrators in the present study believed that without buy-in from teachers and staff, RTI could not be implemented well. School leaders exhibited moral and tactical sponsorship for the collaborative process and allowed teachers the safety of experimenting without the threat of punitive action in order to ultimately facilitate a highly functional and interconnected support system. A key side benefit of having a strong team focus was that it greatly reduced teacher isolationism. In sum, supportive leadership practices and the promotion of increased collaboration fostered a cohesive community and a positive change in school culture.

Underpinning the imperative to increase school-wide collaboration was the vision shared by school administrators. Leadership’s vision is an important aspect of successful organizational change, which is underscored in the literature by Fullan (2007b) and Schein (2010). Schein (2010) discussed the importance of creating a compelling vision or purpose for organizational
change to be successful. Fullan (2007b) explained that principals must establish a moral purpose for teachers to engage in an educational change process. Once teachers have a moral purpose and buy-in to the change, they will become stakeholders in the change process (Fullan, 2007b). In this study, the principal conveyed to teachers and staff that the vision or moral purpose associated with RTI implementation was one of school-wide collaboration. She specifically facilitated her vision in practice by structuring CTTs and SATs in a manner that promoted collaboration across stakeholders in the service of addressing the needs of ELLs, at-risk readers, as well as higher-performing students.

In a seminal study by Hall and Hord (1987) regarding the process of implementing educational change initiatives in elementary and high schools, the researchers found that while principal support was essential to successful implementation, teachers and staff, whom they refer to as second change facilitators, were key to ensuring an efficacious implementation given their role in carrying out the tactical aspects of an initiative. Second change facilitators may be assistant principals, department heads, grade level chairs, or lead teachers (Hall & Hord, 1987). In the current study, the principal charged second change facilitators, such as the SAT coordinators, the special education instructional leader, and grade level chairs, with organizing and carrying out implementation-related tasks. By virtue of doing so, the principal created an environment that fostered collaboration and positively shifted the overall culture of the school. In other words, collaboration was an important byproduct that emerged from the team effort necessary to implement RTI.

Findings from the current study suggest that collaboration around instructional practices changed the school culture, specifically for general education teachers, special education teachers, and administrators. The participants felt a sense of collective ownership for the learning
outcomes of all students in ways they had not prior to the implementation of RTI. This finding was echoed by Swanson et al. (2012) in a study that examined special education teachers’ perceptions of RTI implementation over a five-year period. In Swanson et al.’s (2012) study, special education teachers noted that RTI implementation fostered increased collaboration with general education teachers through discussions related to the development of instructional practices that facilitated positive learning outcomes for all students.

Teachers reported experiencing far less isolationism than they had prior to the RTI model being put in place, which emerged from the increased collaboration facilitated by the implementation of RTI. Bean and Lillenstein (2012) suggested that to be maximally effective, the culture of schools needs to change from one of “isolation to one in which they [teachers] function as a team: working on setting high expectations for the students they serve, implementing effective instructional practices, and always evaluating their work as a means of improving student learning” (p. 500). Moreover, Elmore and Burney (1997) noted that teacher isolationism in schools diminished when school leaders established common planning and meeting times for teachers to work together in teams. In the current study, the frequent and ongoing use of RTI-related teacher teams significantly reduced the experience of teachers working in individual silos when making and implementing instructional decisions.

Schein (2010) and Fullan (2010; 2007b) explained that an effective principal should ensure teachers’ psychological safety and address the anxiety that often emerges as teachers proceed through an organizational change. Both researchers agreed that principals must also engage and support the implementation process by holding a systems perspective and by demonstrating humility with teachers and staff. In this study, the principal helped reduce the anxiety associated with RTI implementation and promote an environment of psychological safety by encouraging
and rewarding trial-and-error experimentation and innovative thinking. She further offered comfort to staff and teachers by exhibiting humility regarding her own learning curve in the effort to effectively implement RTI throughout the school. Additionally, the principal demonstrated her systems perspective by establishing distributed responsibility for student achievement across the school and by supporting a robust organizational teamwork approach. She consistently promoted the perspective that they were all in this together.

Schein (2010) stated that leaders must create participant involvement and learning opportunities to change an organizational culture successfully. Fullan (2007b) also believed that the more complex the change, the more necessary relationships and interactions among teachers become because that exchange is imperative for learning new behaviors and gaining knowledge. In addition to facilitating learning, social interactions offer an opportunity for mutual support, effective communication and changes in mindset. Finally, supportive professional relationships foster a sense of community and facilitate collaboration and collegiality across the organization, which in turn reduces isolationism (Fullan, 2007b; Hord’s, 1997; Shepard and Salembier, 2010).

In this study, the principal greatly increased the opportunities for social interaction among teachers through her new approach to CTT and SAT team meetings and their more frequent and consistent occurrence. A few teachers explained how being an SAT member made them feel supported and, therefore, more comfortable being vulnerable in sharing their professional struggles around meeting students’ needs. Several teachers referenced more frequent and supportive conversations with peers as well as the shift in perspective to one of shared ownership and responsibility for all students as positive developments in the school’s culture and community.
Conclusion Three: Teachers Became More Evidence-based and Data-driven in their Thinking and Practice

Teachers became more evidence-based and data-driven in their thinking and practice as a result of RTI implementation. The importance of data-driven decision-making extends beyond the initial years of RTI implementation as without this element, targeted, ongoing support for the learning outcomes of all types of students would not be possible. Fuchs and Vaughn (2012) also found that the use of multiple measures, such as universal screening and progress monitoring, was necessary to support data-driven decision-making. In the present study, teachers became more savvy consumers of data, leveraged data to facilitate greater instructional fidelity, and benefitted from the diverse teams they were on and the daily time set aside for team meetings to discuss how best to use performance data to facilitate an effective instructional experience for students. Over time, teachers developed a shared meaning around the use of data to inform instruction.

Fuchs and Vaughn (2012), experts in RTI implementation, found the incorporation of progress monitoring was essential for RTI to be effective. According to their research, one of the main accomplishments of RTI that changed teaching practices has been the widespread use of universal screening methods for reading and math to identify at-risk students. Findings from the current study support the assertions of Fuchs and Vaughn (2012). In the present study, however, teachers learned over time to become more discerning in their interpretation of performance data by examining multiple measures rather than relying on a single assessment to screen and identify at-risk students. Additionally, teachers learned to leverage progress monitoring tools to inform ongoing decisions related to instructional practice and targeted student interventions.
According to Grimaldi and Roberts (2011), the increased reliance upon data imposed by RTI facilitates conversations among teachers and administrators that lead to greater horizontal and vertical alignment of curriculum, as well as increased fidelity to instruction across teachers using the same curriculum. This finding was supported by data from both teachers and administrators in the current study who, in addition to the curriculum, also examined their internal assessments and student interventions through ongoing, cross-grade-level team conversations to ensure consistency in instructional practices throughout the school.

Findings from this study align with those presented by Scollins (2016) in her longitudinal study of RTI, which indicated that teachers desired and needed ongoing, designated times for conversations about data. In this study, the administration not only supported the creation of teams made up of cross-grade level teachers, other staff and administrators, but also allocated specific times for regular, collaborative CTT and SAT meetings to review assessments and monitor student progress. As predicted by Scollins’ (2016) research, teachers in the present study both appreciated and leveraged the time allocated by the administration for data studies to improve their teaching practices.

One of the factors Fullan (2007b) identified as affecting the success of educational change initiatives is the assimilation of new knowledge through the creation of shared meaning and understanding among teachers and administrators. This is precisely what emerged within the current study regarding CTT and SAT teams around the use of data to inform instructional practices at the group and individual levels. Once teachers and administrators understood the value of data and felt comfortable with interpreting and using the information gleaned from performance assessments over time, they were able to share in the belief that practically applying this knowledge was beneficial for student learning.
Conclusion Four: The School Developed A Heightened Sense of Internal Accountability

As a result of RTI, internal accountability increased throughout the organization. In part, greater accountability resulted from the equitable distribution of instructional responsibilities across teachers. Moreover, several positive pressures (e.g., a non-punitive context) encouraged by the principal further facilitated internal accountability. For the implementation efforts of an educational initiative to be successful, Schein (2010) and Fullan (2007b) asserted that old habits and behaviors must be supplanted by new ones. In the current study, the school’s ‘old behavior’ emphasized external accountability, which was supplanted by a new focus on internal accountability.

A redistribution of responsibilities across teachers and staff changed how general educators participated in the RTI process. More specifically, the administration mandated that all general education teachers be part of an SAT team and attend new CTT meetings with administration. The SAT teams were coordinated by non-general education teachers such as an instructional coach or a reading interventionist. These coordinators provided specialized reading expertise and allowed grade-level-general-education teachers to both participate in and contribute to the SAT process without having to bear the burden of being in a leadership role. Grade-level-general education teachers’ leveraging the support they received from SAT coordinators, assumed responsibility for monitoring student progress, implementing targeted interventions, and using data to inform instructional decisions during CTT meetings. White et al. (2012) found that RTI implementation often led to role and responsibility changes for general education teachers that facilitated their ability to better support at-risk students.

According to Fullan (2010), positive pressures facilitate greater internal accountability within a school. In particular, positive pressures such as transparency of results and practice-
related insights, peer partnerships, and a non-punitive environment facilitate greater internal accountability. Fullan also emphasized the importance of building and nurturing ongoing supportive peer networks that provide collaborative opportunities for teachers to learn and grow in their daily work so they may better serve and instruct students.

In this study, the principal mandated new cross-grade-level partnerships among general education teachers in the form of SAT and CTT teams who were also used as a vehicle to examine data and instructional practices. Additionally, the principal created a context in which teachers felt a sense of non-judgment that allowed them to explore alternate instructional strategies, as well as creative options for addressing the needs of all students within the school. Leveraging positive pressures in this manner was an important shift within the school that not only facilitated greater internal accountability but also promoted the successful implementation of RTI.

Schein (2010) and Fullan (2007b) explained that once teachers experience success with an educational initiative and are satisfied with the impact of the changes that have been implemented, the initiative becomes part of the new organization, supplanting the old ways of operating. In the current study, the principal made a conscious decision to shift the organizational focus from one that was heavily reliant on external, high-stakes accountability test results, to one in which internal assessments and RTI review processes became the focal points for measuring student success. Internal assessments, in particular, provided multiple data points over the year regarding student progress on math and reading skills. As a result of the emphasis being placed more heavily on internal rather than external accountability, new habits such as greater collaboration among teachers and a sense of responsibility for the learning outcomes of all students, took hold and became the new norm. The more teachers experienced success with
implementing these new habits, the more consistently their old conceptions associated with supporting student achievement were supplanted. The collective impact of RTI implementation on internal structures and on teachers’ practices and habits resulted in the school’s success being more broadly defined than just by the results of external accountability assessments.

**Summary**

Individualized instruction was a key element that changed during RTI implementation. Improved and increased individualization of instruction at both the individual and group levels was facilitated by teachers' change in instructional mindset and increased understanding of the distinction between re-teaching skills and identifying skill deficits. Teachers also benefitted from having designated time to learn how best to individualize support for Tier 1 and Tier 2 students. These improvements to teachers' instructional abilities were facilitated by the support of school administrators.

Due to altered communication pathways and team structures, collaboration among stakeholders increased across the organization as a result of RTI implementation and was found to be essential for properly addressing the complexity associated with meeting all students’ learning needs. In the present study, the principal leveraged second-change facilitators to promote a more effective SAT structure that, in turn, fostered collaboration among teachers and staff across the school. This emphasis on a team culture promoted a sense of shared responsibility for the success of all students, while simultaneously reducing teacher isolationism. New knowledge and behaviors were learned through the new supportive pathways and reinforced by peer relationships and frequent interactions. The principal effectively managed the organizational change by demonstrating her emotional strength and humility in conjunction with
utilizing the system’s level thinking to enact changes. In these ways, the principal actualized her vision of school-wide collaboration.

As part of the implementation of RTI, administrators and teachers learned to routinely leverage data to inform instruction and interventions. Moreover, administrators supported teachers’ use of data to inform instructional decisions by giving them more time to determine which instructional strategies and interventions were best suited to each student. Professional development was also made available for teachers to learn and practice new skills, which in turn helped create greater fidelity of instruction across teachers. Teachers and administrators became more comfortable and competent with evidence-based and data-based practices and thinking.

The implementation of RTI brought new processes and structures as well as greater reliance on the use of multiple internal assessments to monitor student progress and inform instructional practice. As a result, teachers and administrators supplanted a focus on external accountability with one more heavily weighted toward internal accountability. The more teachers and administrators embraced a sense of internal accountability, the more efficacious they felt about their ability to successfully implement RTI and serve the needs of all students.

**Implications for Practice**

The purpose of this study was to understand how RTI implementation impacted the practices of teachers and administrators. Based on the conclusions discussed previously and on the pertinent research literature, several major implications for changes in practice emerged from this study. More specifically, in order to successfully implement RTI:

1) Administrators should designate time for enrichment and interventions that do not interfere with core instruction;
2) Teachers and administrators should leverage performance data to inform sound instructional practices;

3) Administrators should create a mixed-team structure (i.e., create teams comprise of interventionists, coaches, specialists, upper and lower grades);

4) Administrators should allocate time for teachers to meet and discuss appropriate strategies for addressing the needs of all students;

5) Administrators should ensure adequate funding to support student learning and teacher staffing;

6) Administrators should enlist district support and resources for teacher professional development;

7) Administrators should make school psychologists full-time employees based on campus; and,

8) Administrators should recruit and train leaders to address systemic change in schools.

Designate Time for Enrichment and Interventions that Do Not Interfere with Core Instruction

Administrators should not supplant core instruction time with that designated for student interventions. Instead, administrators and teachers need to ensure that at-risk students receive both core instruction and interventions. Participants in the current study discussed how, in the early years of RTI, they implemented interventions during core instruction, which resulted in students not receiving enough core instructional minutes. To adjust for these circumstances, the administration changed the schedule to allow for separate intervention and enrichment blocks, which did not interfere with a students’ availability for core instruction. Participants talked about how establishing the intervention and enrichment blocks was important for helping to ensure
learning opportunities were available for all students. To avoid stigmatizing students, these blocks were referred to as enrichment, whether they were used to provide students with enrichment or intervention.

**Leverage Performance Data to Inform Sound Instructional Practices**

Teachers and administrators must leverage student performance data to inform instructional decisions. Teachers and administrators need to utilize multiple data points in conjunction with other assessments and screeners to make informed instructional decisions and recommendations. At-risk students’ needs were often missed when the administration relied heavily on one or two data points. Over time, the administration broadened its understanding of data-based decisions to include teacher recommendations, ongoing student performance assessments within the core curricula, as well as intervention progress monitoring data.

**Create a Mixed Team Structure**

Administrators at elementary schools should employ a mixed-team SAT structure. By ensuring that teachers from varying grade levels and functions are represented on an SAT team, general education teachers, in particular, have the opportunity to increase their knowledge and skills in areas such as foundational reading that will allow them to serve the learning needs of students at all levels better. In this study, a mixed SAT team structure ensured that at least one teacher with knowledge of foundational reading skills would be present on every team because reading is a primary issue for many grade-level students. A mixed team structure also helps to promote mutual, professional respect among educators.

**Allocate Time for Teachers to Meet and Discuss Appropriate Strategies for Addressing the Needs of Students**
Administrators need to ensure that teachers are provided time with administrators and colleagues on an ongoing basis in order to adjust and refine the RTI framework and processes in SLT, SAT, PBIS, and grade-level teams. In the current study, teachers worked together during designated times to discuss curriculum and instruction, the support of Tier 2 students, and the application of appropriate student interventions.

**Ensure Adequate Funding to Support Student Learning and Teacher Staffing**

Administrators must ensure that they secure adequate funding to support the staffing levels necessary to implement RTI effectively. Participants in the present study described how the challenges stemming from staffing and budget cuts negatively affected them and their ability to meet the needs of at-risk students in particular. The loss of both a special education teacher and reading teacher negatively affected their ability to support students most at-risk.

**Enlist District Support and Resources for Teacher Professional Development**

District support, resources, and coordination with schools are critical to helping teachers and administrators implement and sustain RTI-related change practices. Building administrators in the current study provided teachers with access to district curriculum specialists who provided reading and SAT training, as well as data experts who supported teachers’ development in the areas of data analysis and data-driven decision-making. Thereby, teachers developed a greater comfort level with leveraging data to inform their instructional practice. Study participants routinely acknowledged that having this support at the school and district levels helped increase their sense of competence for successfully implementing RTI with all students.

As a scholar-practitioner, my own practice is impacted by the results of this study. As an administrator, I need to ensure students receive the appropriate intervention without supplanting core instruction, as noted in the research and this study. I will reexamine the master schedule to
ensure students have enrichment blocks to address learning gaps properly while still receiving core instruction. To better meet the needs of students needing Tier 2 supports and ongoing student performance meetings in SAT, I am considering the mixed team structure by creating more SAT teams to meet the number of students in the SAT process better. By having all general education teachers on these mixed teams, I feel that students’ needs can be more proactively met and communication around performance articulated to parents in a more timely fashion, in addition to providing early reading knowledge on each SAT team.

**Make School Psychologists Full-Time Employees Based on Campus**

The need for a full-time school psychologist at elementary schools is especially salient today, due to the increasing numbers of students with complex emotional needs related to trauma as well as those who require behavior support from disabilities, such as autism. The skills of a school psychologist may facilitate students’ ability to thrive in the least restrictive environment and may additionally benefit teachers, staff, and families. Having a full-time psychologist in residence at elementary schools would afford the opportunity to directly support students who need to participate in Tier 2 or Tier 3 RTI practices and to weigh in on special education eligibility decisions. In these scenarios, school psychologists would collaborate daily with administration, teachers, and families to support the learning needs of some of the most vulnerable students, who may or may not be officially identified for special education services at the elementary-school level.

**Should Recruit and Train Leaders to Address Systemic Change in Schools**

Aspiring leaders should be recruited and trained in systemic change principles. Due to the increasing demands to balance internal and external mandates, new leaders (both those who are new to and veterans of the K – 12 school environment) should receive administrative leadership
training on the principles of change, including the common pitfalls associated with implementing an organization-wide change initiative. Additionally, new leaders should be encouraged to leverage internal staff and external networks at the district, school, community, state, and federal levels that support organizational learning, growth, and change.

**Future Research**

There are several areas of study that would add value to further understanding the impact of RTI in schools. First, a comparison between the RTI implementation efforts of rural versus urban schools in NM may provide a broader view of RTI’s impact, given that roughly half of the schools in the state fall into one of these categories. A study comparing RTI implementation in an urban versus rural school may provide additional insights into if and how best practices differ across contexts.

Second, a mixed-methods study that combines qualitative and quantitative data may offer additional insights about RTI implementation beyond a purely qualitative study, especially as the long-term efficacy of RTI for students remains an open question. Thus, a study that examines the long-term achievement outcomes of RTI by aggregating K – 12 student data, including graduation rates, as well as qualitative data from teachers and administrators, may provide a more robust understanding of the efficacy of RTI.

The third direction for future research may be to conduct a qualitative study of an integrated RTI implementation focused at the district rather than at the school level as such an investigation may reveal additional useful insights about RTI implementation and its sustainability across schools within a district. Presently, there is minimal understanding of an integrated RTI’s impact across the spectrum of K – 12.
The fourth area for further exploration is to focus on the impact of technology on RTI implementation. More specifically, while schools utilize technology for data collection related to universal screening and progress monitoring assessments, there is minimal understanding of how technology may be leveraged to improve tiered instruction, RTI teaching practices and data-based decision-making overall.

Finally, there is limited research incorporating the parent perspective of RTI. A mixed-methods study comprised of interviews and surveys of K–12 parents regarding their experience with RTI, may, therefore, provide valuable information for schools such as how best to engage parents in RTI and how parents perceive the school’s RTI efforts.

**Limitations**

While the study may be a representative qualitative case study of RTI implementation, the findings of the research can not necessarily be generalized across all elementary schools. The first limitation is bound by the location, time, and experiences of the participants at this particular elementary school. Specifically, this qualitative case study may not be applicable or generalizable to other communities that are dissimilar to the urban area in New Mexico, where it was conducted. Additionally, this study had a large, diverse elementary school student population that may not be representative of other elementary school populations. New Mexico has the highest poverty rate in the United States, and therefore the findings may not be comparable to other states or regions within the country whose students represent different socio-economic demographics. The findings also may not be applicable to other rural schools in New Mexico as these schools may not share the same level of district support for implementation that was present in the school at which the study was conducted.
A second limitation of the study may be the result of purposive sampling. Purposive sampling of the site excluded elementary schools in New Mexico that had not achieved an A or B rating on the state’s grading system. Additionally, within the site, purposive sampling excluded educational assistants and newer teachers. Thus, conclusions drawn from the current study may not be applicable to other elementary schools and may represent a skewed perspective of the participating school itself, given the relatively small sample size of 16 participants.

Participants’ incomplete and selective memory regarding the early RTI implementation efforts in the school, precludes any definitive conclusions from being drawn about how the implementation process evolved over time. Several participants indicated that they were unable to remember details when asked about events related to the initial implementation of RTI.

**Concluding Thoughts and Reflections**

This qualitative case study focused on capturing a moment in time, midway through the long journey of RTI implementation in an urban elementary school. The personal stories and journey of each participant shaped this study. Throughout, participants expressed their resolve and commitment to meet the diverse needs of all students in their school despite the limited resources present in the state. They conveyed a sense of trust in the RTI framework to help them achieve their commitment. The teachers and administrators who participated in the study attributed their success in large part to strong collaboration across the school community. Additionally, having stable and supportive leadership created a context in which the RTI initiative could be successfully implemented.

As a scholar-practitioner, I noted similarities from the participants’ experiences to my own experiences as an administrator, who participated in RTI implementation in two locations over the course of my career. I have seen directly the challenges in supporting all students with
limited resources and looking at positive ways to overcome the challenges of implementing a complex framework like RTI. In my experience, which is similar to that of the participants’, RTI is an evolving process with respect to universal screening, data collection, tiered instruction, progress monitoring, and data-based decision making. Beyond those changes, however, in my own experience and in this study, general education teachers also adapted over time to engage in more direct, collaborative conversations with their colleagues around student needs, student performance, and matching appropriate interventions to individual students. Similar to the participants in my study, I also adapted to these changes and went from asking, “What is RTI?” to connecting with fellow teachers and administrators through how best to facilitate targeted instruction and interventions. In other words, there was a change from an intellectual understanding of RTI to one that emphasized the practice of RTI. Having experienced the challenge of meeting the learning needs of all students, I resonated with and respected the hard work of the participants in this study.

As a scholar at Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies doctoral program in Curriculum, Teaching, Learning, and Leadership, I was able to hone my analytical skills by learning from my professors and fellow doctoral students during my coursework. However, the real work of becoming a scholar was developed by engaging in the dissertation process. I learned a lot from the challenges of crafting a research proposal, carrying out a research design and collecting data. I also gained a great appreciation for the huge undertaking entailed in documenting, analyzing and articulating the findings from the mountain of data that I collected in the process of conducting this dissertation. In some ways, I’m happy that I was blissfully ignorant about these challenges at the start of the process.

Beyond what I learned about being a scholar, there were many additional lessons
for me as a practitioner as a result of conducting this study. For example, while I was familiar with RTI, I was surprised to discover the way in which the fifth-grade team and administration leveraged RTI to challenge gifted students using enriching experiences. Another area that impressed me was the detailed analysis of student performance undertaken by teachers and how this was used to refine instruction and interventions during SAT and CTT meetings. While I had experienced these types of meetings in my own career, I was impressed by the degree to which these educators engaged in deep conversations that were focused on meeting student needs, analyzing student performance data, and crafting targeted interventions. I feel tremendous gratitude for the opportunity I was granted to listen and observe teachers and administrators who were truly invested in meeting the needs of all students. I have no doubt that my rigorous academic experience at Northeastern combined with the practical experience of conducting an experientially based study in an authentic setting will serve to enhance my abilities as an educator and allow me to make a positive contribution to the field going forward.

Reflecting further on organizational change theory and the findings from this study has to lead me to believe that practitioners in K – 12 settings should have a fundamental understanding of organizational change theory, as I believe this knowledge can help them be more effective at educating students for the 21st century. More specifically, when school leaders, fueled by internal and external pressures, force educational change without considering factors such as resistance, relationships, and pacing, they set the initiative up for failure, when, in fact, it may have had great merit for students and teachers alike.

In my professional experience, I have found that teachers and administrators often characterize educational initiatives in terms of a checklist to be completed or ignored until the next initiative comes along and the cycle repeats. This perspective is often underpinned by
administrators’ failure to focus on key areas, such as the ways in which the teacher, staff, student, and family experience is impacted by an initiative. Time for thoughtful consideration of the initiative’s implications is typically not allocated and the psychological safety of staff and faculty to question the changes or experiment with alternate strategies for implementation is often overlooked. Additionally, time is rarely afforded to reflect in retrospect on the lessons learned once an initiative is no longer in play. To move an organization forward, I believe deep reflection and investment in teaching and learning should accompany the implementation of organizational initiatives.

The implementation process should also be guided by organizational change theories to bolster support for long-term system- and building-level cultural shifts. Moreover, an understanding of organizational change theory may afford administrators and teachers a greater ability to navigate the increasing external demands placed on them without sacrificing the instructional core comprised of teachers, students, and instruction.

The mindset that guided me through this long marathon research process was the belief that I would find success in every failure. Each time I was asked to iterate on my analysis or writing, I reached a deeper understanding and appreciation for the research process. It also allowed me to more closely empathize with my participants, as they, too, were involved in a learning experience that required ongoing iterations to make meaningful improvements. I also had to consistently strive to connect to my tenacity and internal motivation to complete this work, especially given the many twists, turns and changes that I experienced external to this process. I am grateful to have grown in ways I could not have anticipated at the start of this journey.
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Appendix A: District Letter of Institutional Cooperation and Recruitment

Northeastern University

October 24, 2017

Dear Dr. Miller,

My name is Michael Giurlando and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. I am preparing to conduct research for my dissertation under the direction of my advisor, Dr. Elisabeth Bennett. I desire the opportunity to study educators’ perceptions at Contigo Elementary School due its strong student growth for all students and its implementation of an integrated RTI framework. The purpose of the study is to examine and analyze educator’s perceptions and changes caused by the implementation RTI.

Perspectives from teachers and administrators are sought for this study. Individual interviews and focus groups are the means to gather some of this information. Individual interviews will be conduct for approximately 60 -120 minutes. Focus groups will be conducted for 60 to 120 minutes. Observations of the grade level meetings, Student Assisted Teams, and other activities related to RTI will be conducted. Any artifacts or documents that you can share with me will also be considered for my study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Confidentiality will be discussed with participants. Pseudonymys will be used for participants, the district, and school.

Please send me a letter of permission to confirm that you will participate in this research and allow staff members to participate voluntarily and without any repercussions. Be aware that the findings from my study will be published in my dissertation and other publications, but I will provide a pseudonym for the district, school, and any staff who will participate so as to maintain confidentiality. All participants will sign an informed consent to note their willingness to be included in the study. Participants may withdraw from any individual interview or focus group discussion at any time. Participants will be able to withdraw from the study until their data is entered into the research record. Once the data has been analyzed, it will remain as part of the study. Conversations will be audio- recorded. Identities of individual interviews will be kept confidential.

If you are in agreement to engaging in this research study, and would like to participate in the hopes to help other schools learn from your experiences, please email me back. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact by phone or email that is listed below. Thank you again for considering this research opportunity.
Sincerely,

Michael Giurlando

Doctoral Candidate

832-722-5568

giurlando.m@husky.neu.edu
Appendix B: Elementary School Invitation to Participate

October 25, 2017

Dear Principal Beard,

My name is Michael Giurlando and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. I am preparing to conduct research for my dissertation under the direction of my advisor, Dr. Elisabeth Bennett. I desire the opportunity to study educators’ perceptions at Contigo Elementary School due its strong student growth for all students and its implementation of an integrated RTI framework. The purpose of the study is to examine and analyze educator’s perceptions and changes caused by the implementation RTI.

Perspectives from teachers and administrators are sought for this study. Individual interviews and focus groups are the means to gather some of this information. Individual interviews will be conducted for approximately 60-120 minutes. Focus groups will be conducted for 60 to 120 minutes. Observations of the grade level meetings, Student Assisted Teams, and other activities related to RTI will be conducted. Any artifacts or documents that you can share with me will also be considered for my study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Confidentiality will be discussed with participants. Pseudonyms will be used for participants, the district, and school.

Please send me an emailed response back confirming that you will participate in this research and allow staff members to participate voluntarily and without any repercussions. Be aware that the findings from my study will be published in my dissertation and other publications, but I will provide a pseudonym for the district, school, and any staff who will participate so as to maintain confidentiality. All participants will sign an informed consent to note their willingness to be included in the study. Participants may withdraw from any individual interview or focus group discussion at any time. Participants will be able to withdraw from the study until their data is entered into the research record. Once the data has been analyzed, it will remain as part of the study. Conversations will be audio-recorded. Identities of individual interviews will be kept confidential.

If you are in agreement to engaging in this research study, and would like to participate in the hopes to help other schools learn from your experiences, please email me back. A separate
recruitment email to staff will follow once you confirmed your school’s participation in the study. Any questions or concerns that you may have can be addressed by contacting by phone or email that is listed below. Thank you again for considering this research opportunity.

Sincerely,

Michael Giurlando

Doctoral Candidate

832-722-5568

giurlando.m@husky.neu.edu
Appendix C: Recruitment Email for Elementary School Staff Participation

Dear staff,

My name is Michael Giurlando and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. I am preparing to conduct research for my dissertation under the direction of my advisor, Dr. Elisabeth Bennett. I desire the opportunity to study educators’ perceptions at Contigo Elementary School due its strong student growth for all students and its implementation of an integrated RTI framework. The purpose of the study is to examine and analyze educator’s perceptions and changes caused by the implementation RTI.

Perspectives from teachers and administrators are sought for this study. Individual interviews and focus groups are the means to gather some of this information. Individual interviews will be conducted for approximately 60 -120 minutes. Focus groups will be conducted for 60 to 120 minutes. Observations of the grade level meetings, Student Assisted Teams (SAT), and other activities related to RTI will be conducted. Any artifacts or documents that you can share with me will also be considered for my study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Confidentiality will be discussed with participants. Pseudonyms will be used for participants, the district, and school.

Please email me at giurlando.m@husky.neu.edu if you wish to volunteer or if you have any questions. If you do not volunteer, you will not be contacted again regarding this research.

Thank you for considering this research opportunity.

Sincerely,

Michael Giurlando

Doctoral Candidate

832-722-5568

giurlando.m@husky.neu.edu
Appendix D: Semi-structured Interview Guide

Semi-structured Interview Protocol Form for Educational Staff

Interview Protocol
Institution: Contigo Elementary School
Interviewee (Title and Name): ______________________________________
Date: _____________________________________
Location of Interview: Contigo Elementary School

INTRODUCTION
Thank you for partaking in this study. My name is Michael Giurlando and I will ask questions and have a discussion with you around RTI’s implementation and sustainability. This interview will be recorded. Participants will have an opportunity later to review the findings of the study. As noted in the informed consent, a participant may stop participating in this interview session at anytime. Participants will be able to withdraw until their data is entered into the research record. Once the data has been analyzed, it will remain as part of the study.

I appreciate you taking the time out of your day to speak with me in regard to this topic.

Introduction (Demographic Questions)
A demographic survey should be completed through a google link and form. If you have not received the link, please let me know and I will resend it to you.

If I have any questions or need clarification on anything after the interview, I will reach out to you.

I will begin recording the interview.

I have a few quick general questions to ask of you of your professional background.

- What other K-12 public school roles have you held in your career? Please explain if applicable to your educational career.
- How many years have you worked with Response to Intervention in New Mexico, which was passed into law in 2007?
- How many years have you worked with the Response to Intervention in your current school?
- How many years have you worked with PBIS or PBS, which is the social emotional side of Response to Intervention? In your current school?
- What leadership positions, if any, have you held in the school? (SAT, grade level chair, committees, or as determined by your school)
- Do you hold any special certifications? (National Board Certification, Reading Recovery, other)
**Semi-structured Interview**

I hope to better understand your journey implementing RTI through stories and examples that will provide details for the study. As a reminder, I will be in touch with you about the data gathered here today. As noted in the informed consent, I will have you check the findings and interpretations of the study at a later time. I will contact you by email or phone to follow up with you.

**R1** How did an urban elementary school in New Mexico implement an integrated RTI model?

1. Reconstruct the detail of implementing and sustaining RTI framework with academic and behavioral and social supports.
2. How have the core components of RTI implemented changed the school? (universal screening, progress monitoring, data-based decision making, tiered instruction)
3. Tell me a story about one of your challenges with RTI implementation.
4. Describe a key experience that you associate with resistance to the RTI implementation.

**R2** How did the implementation of the integrated model of RTI change teaching practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?

5. Give me an example (s) of what you did differently to make this a successful implementation. Think of these three areas: a) teacher or administrator b) student engagement c) content
6. How is RTI supporting all students differently? How did it change practices?
   Possible Follow Up - How did affect your team? Grade Level, Leadership Team, etc…
7. Describe, in as much detail as possible, a situation where Response to Intervention is in effect positively impacting students and staff.
8. How has RTI impacted the school’s culture?

**R3** How did implementation of an integrated RTI framework change leadership practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?

9. How did leadership of staff impact implementation or change overtime?
10. Describe some of the key relationships that have instrumental in supporting the implementation.
11. Describe what you do in your role(s) to support implementation of RTI academics and PBS in this school? How do you remember it? What was your role in it?
12. Anything that you would like to add about the change process in implementing RTI?

Thank you for taking the time to discuss your experience. I will turn off the recording device at this time.
Appendix E: Focus Group Interview Guide

Focus Interview Protocol Form

INTRODUCTION
Thank you for partaking in this study. My name is Michael Giurlando and I will ask questions and have a discussion with you around RTI’s implementation and sustainability. This interview will be recorded. Participants will have an opportunity later to review the findings of the study. As noted in the informed consent, a participant may stop participating in this interview session at anytime. Participants will be able to withdraw until their data is entered into the research record. Once the data has been analyzed, it will remain as part of the study.

I appreciate you taking the time out of your day to speak with me in regard to this topic.

Introduction (Demographic Questions)

A demographic survey should be completed through a google link and form. If you have not received the link, please let me know and I will resend it to you.

If I have any questions or need clarification on anything after the interview, I will reach out to you.

I will begin recording the interview.

I have a few quick general questions to ask of you of your professional background. I will ask each participant to replay to the set of questions below.

- What other K-12 public school roles have you held in your career? Please explain if applicable to your educational career.
- How many years have you worked with Response to Intervention in New Mexico, which was passed into law in 2007?
- How many years have you worked with the Response to Intervention in your current school?
- How many years have you worked with PBIS or PBS, which is the social emotional side of Response to Intervention? In your current school?
- What leadership positions, if any, have you held in the school? (SAT, grade level chair, committees, or as determined by your school)
- Do you hold any special certifications? (National Board Certification, Reading Recovery, other)

Use a flip chart to explore RTI implementation in the school.
R1 How did an urban elementary school in New Mexico implement an integrated RTI model?

1. How has the staff been trained on the RTI framework and its essential components (tiered instruction, universal screening, progress monitoring, and data-based decision making)?

R2 How did the implementation of the integrated model of RTI change teaching practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?

2. Describe how has RTI has impacted your students, your instruction, and collaboration?
3. Has the RTI process stayed the same or changed over time?

R3 How did implementation of an integrated RTI framework change leadership practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?

4. Who were the leaders of the RTI implementation in the beginning? Now?
5. What type of supports helped you feel more comfortable with RTI?
6. What caused problems with implementation? How significant is that problem now? How has this issue evolved?

Ending Question/debriefing (Additional Experiences and perceptions)
7. Knowing what you know now, how would you approach RTI implementation?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience within your school with respect to RTI implementation?

Follow up questions, if necessary
1. How did academic RTI changes integrate with the behavioral RTI? (Implementation)
2. What could be done better to support RTI implementation? (Administrative Support/Resources)
3. What have you learned through the process of RTI implementation? (Experience and perceptions)
4. Do you think there has been a change in student achievement due to RTI? (Student Impact)
5. What evidence or data do you have that supports your perception? (Student Impact)
Appendix F: Participant Informed Consent for Individual Interviews

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask us to stop as we go through the information and we will take time to explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them of us.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being invited to take part in this research, because we feel that your experience as a teacher or administrator can contribute to our understanding and knowledge in implementing Response to Intervention at the elementary level. Your knowledge and experiences may help school organizations support students more effectively and guide staff in dealing with organizational changes, resulting from implementing Response to Intervention.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to understand and learn how elementary teachers and administrators are adjusting to and implementing Response to Intervention in New Mexico. Nationally, teachers and administrators feel frustrated with the complexity of implementation efforts. We believe that you can help us by telling us what you know about Response to Intervention and how your local practices changed due to its implementation and sustainability.

The implementation of an integrated Response to Intervention framework makes teacher and administrators operate in new ways to meet the needs of all students. We want to learn from you about the changes that you made in order to implement Response to Intervention. We want to understand the different perspectives and ways people within the organization responded and adapted to Response to Intervention implementation over time. We want to know more about
local practices, because this knowledge might help us learn how to support other school communities who are also implementing it.

**What will I be asked to do?**

The study will take place over a three to five-month period. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in an interview and complete a questionnaire. The interview questions focus on Response to Intervention implementation and will take approximately 60 to 120 minutes. The questionnaire asks about your demographics, length of time working in the school, and experiences implementing Response to Intervention. The questionnaire will be sent to you at your work email address and has seven questions for you to complete.

**Northeastern University, Department**

**Name of Investigator(s):** Dr. Elisabeth Bennett;

Michael Giurlando

**Title of Project: Response to Intervention: A qualitative case study at an urban elementary school in New Mexico**

We are asking you to help us learn more about Response to Intervention in your school. We are inviting you to take part in this research project. If you accept, you will be asked to participate in the individual interview in the manner outlined below.

Individual interviews will typically take place in the Contigo Elementary School. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions during the interview, you may say so and the interviewer will move on to the next question. Only the interviewer will be present for the interview. The interview will be recorded but you will not be identified by name during the interview. The information provided will be kept confidential, and no one else except an audio transcriber will have access to the recording. The audio file will be stored on the researcher’s secure and password-protected computer. The audio files will be destroyed after meeting graduation requirements and compliance standards for storage of data. The audio files will be destroyed two weeks after the dissertation is accepted and complete.

**Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?**

You will be interviewed at your school or at a place and location convenient to you. The focus group interview will take approximately 60 to 120 minutes. A questionnaire with seven questions will also need to be completed. The questionnaire will be emailed to you electronically at your work address. You will complete the questionnaire online and should take 5 to 10 minutes.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**
There are minimal risks or discomfort in sharing information. As a participant, you should feel comfortable sharing only what you want us to know. If you share some personal or confidential information by chance or that you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics, you can skip the question or stop the interview at anytime. We do not wish for this to happen. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion or interview if you feel the question(s) are too personal or if talking about them makes you uncomfortable.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit to you. However, your participation is likely to help others learn how effective school organizations function and adapt to new, complex changes like Response to Intervention.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being part of this project.

The information that we collect from this research project will be kept private. Any information about you will have a number or pseudonym on it instead of your real name. Your school and district administrators will not have access to the information you share. Only the researchers will know what your number or pseudonym; the information will be locked in a file cabinet or on a password protected computer.

The knowledge that we get from this research will be shared with you before it is made widely available to the public. Each participant will receive a summary of the results. We will publish the results so that other interested people may learn from the research. Findings from the study will be presented as a summary or aggregate. Cactus Public Schools requires researchers provide a summary of any research completed in the District. Shortly after the thesis is defended and approved by Northeastern University, a summary of the research study will be provided to the District.

Because your responses are important and we want to make sure to capture everything you say, we would like to audio tape our conversation today. We will also be taking written notes during the interview. We can assure you that all responses will be confidential and that a pseudonym will be used when quoting from the transcripts. The audio file will be transcribed by a transcriptionist, who will sign a confidentiality agreement. We will be the only one privy to your information. The audio files will be destroyed after meeting graduation requirements and
compliance standards for storage of data. The audio files will be destroyed two weeks after the dissertation is accepted and complete.

Identifiable data gathered will be destroyed a year after completion of the study. Identifiable data includes papers with real names of participants or case site. These documents will be shredded and identifiable computer files will be deleted along with any backup copies of papers and computer files. De-identified data like from transcripts with pseudonyms will be kept indefinitely. In order to be compliant with Northeastern’s research regulations, signed informed consents will be kept for three years after completion of the study.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations, such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?

You do not have to participate in the study.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?

There are minimal risks of harm to you if you participate in this research study. If you participate in this research, no compensation or payment will be provided.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Michael Giurlando at giurlando.m@husky.neu.edu, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact the Principal Investigator Dr. Elisabeth Bennett at El.bennett@neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University,
Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

There will not be any costs attributed to you for your participation in the study.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**

N/A

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________

Signature of person agreeing to take part    Date

____________________________________________

Printed name of person above

____________________________________________

Signature of person who explained the study to the Date    participant above and obtained consent

____________________________________________

Printed name of person above
Appendix G: Participant Informed Consent for Focus Group Interviews

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

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Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being invited to take part in this research, because we feel that your experience as a teacher or administrator can contribute to our understanding and knowledge in implementing Response to Intervention at the elementary level. Your knowledge and experiences may help school organizations support students more effectively and guide staff in dealing with organizational changes, resulting from implementing Response to Intervention.

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local practices, because this knowledge might help us learn how to support other school communities who are also implementing it.

**What will I be asked to do?**

The study will take place over a three to five-month period. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in an interview and complete a questionnaire. The interview questions focus on Response to Intervention implementation and will take approximately 60 to 120 minutes. The questionnaire asks about your demographics, length of time working in the school, and experiences implementing Response to Intervention. The questionnaire will be sent to you at your work email address and has seven questions for you to complete.

**Northeastern University, Department**
**Name of Investigator(s):** Dr. Elisabeth Bennett; Michael Giurlando
**Title of Project:** Response to Intervention: A qualitative case study at an urban elementary school in New Mexico

We are asking you to help us learn more about Response to Intervention in your school. We are inviting you to take part in this research project. If you accept, you will be asked to participate in the individual interview in the manner outlined below.

Individual interviews will typically take place in the Contigo Elementary School. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions during the interview, you may say so and the interviewer will move on to the next question. Only the interviewer will be present for the interview. The interview will be recorded but you will not be identified by name during the interview. The information provided will be kept confidential, and no one else except an audio transcriber will have access to the recording. The audio file will be stored on the researcher’s secure and password-protected computer. The audio files will be destroyed after meeting graduation requirements and compliance standards for storage of data. The audio files will be destroyed two weeks after the dissertation is accepted and complete.

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You will be interviewed at your school or at a place and location convenient to you. The interview will take approximately 60 to 120 minutes. A questionnaire with seven questions will also need to be completed. The questionnaire will be emailed to you electronically at your work address. You will complete the questionnaire online and should take 5 to 10 minutes.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**
There are minimal risks or discomfort in sharing information. As a participant, you should feel comfortable sharing only what you want us to know. If you share some personal or confidential information by chance or that you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics, you can skip the question or stop the interview at anytime. We do not wish for this to happen. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion or interview if you feel the question(s) are too personal or if talking about them makes you uncomfortable.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

There will be no direct benefit to you. However, your participation is likely to help others learn how effective school organizations function and adapt to new, complex changes like Response to Intervention.

Who will see the information about me?

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being part of this project.

The information that we collect from this research project will be kept private. Any information about you will have a number or pseudonym on it instead of your real name. Your school and district administrators will not have access to the information you share. Only the researchers will know what your number or pseudonym; the information will be locked in a file cabinet or on a password protected computer.

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In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations, such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?

You do not have to participate in the study.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?

There are minimal risks of harm to you if you participate in this research study. If you participate in this research, no compensation or payment will be provided.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee.

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Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?

You will not be compensated for your participation in this research study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

There will not be any costs attributed to you for your participation in the study.

Is there anything else I need to know?

N/A

I agree to take part in this research.

____________________________________________  ________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part    Date

____________________________________________
Printed name of person above

_____________________________________________ Printed name of person above
Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above

Date and obtained consent
Appendix H: Informed Consent Document for Participant’s Observation

Northeastern University, Department
Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Elisabeth Bennett; Michael Giurlando
Title of Project: Response to Intervention: A qualitative case study at an urban elementary school in New Mexico

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask us to stop as we go through the information and we will take time to explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them of us.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You are being invited to take part in this research, because we feel that your experience as a parent, teacher or administrator can contribute to our understanding and knowledge in implementing Response to Intervention at the elementary level. Your knowledge and experiences may help school organizations support students more effectively and guide staff in dealing with organizational changes, resulting from implementing Response to Intervention.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is to understand and learn how elementary teachers and administrators are adjusting to and implementing Response to Intervention in New Mexico. Nationally, teachers and administrators feel frustrated with the complexity of implementation efforts. We believe that you can help us by telling us what you know about Response to Intervention and how your local practices changed due to its implementation and sustainability.

The implementation of an integrated Response to Intervention framework makes teacher and administrators operate in new ways to meet the needs of all students. We want to learn from you about the changes that you made in order to implement Response to Intervention. We want to understand the different perspectives and ways people within the organization responded and adapted to Response to Intervention implementation over time. We want to know more about local practices, because this knowledge might help us learn how to support other school communities who are also implementing it.

What will I be asked to do?
The study will take place over a three to five-month period. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in an observation. We are asking you to help us learn more about Response to Intervention in your school. We are inviting you to take part in this research project. If you accept, you will be asked to participate in an observation.
Observations will typically take place in the Contigo Elementary School. Only the researcher will be present for the observation. My role will be explained at the beginning of the meeting. Any Consent concerns or issues will be discussed with the researcher in the beginning of the meeting.

The researcher will only observe the meeting and take notes, but you will not be identified in the study. The researcher will not write down any personally identifying information about any student or the parent. The researcher will select a pseudonym for you. The information provided will be kept confidential.

The researcher is focusing on the process. Therefore, the researcher will not be interacting or asking questions in the meeting, only observing it.

**Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?**

The observation will be at your school or at a place and location convenient to you. The observation may be a meeting of professionals or a parents’ meeting with staff. The observation will take as long as the allotted meeting time, but these meetings usually will take 30-60 minutes.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

There are minimal risks or discomfort in sharing information. As a participant, you should feel comfortable sharing only what you want us to know. If you share some personal or confidential information by chance or that you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics, you can skip the question or stop the observation at anytime. We do not wish for this to happen. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the observation. You may ask the researcher to leave the observation if you feel the question(s) are too personal or if talking about them in the meetings with the presence of the researcher makes you uncomfortable.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit to you. However, your participation is likely to help others learn how effective school organizations function and adapt to new, complex changes like Response to Intervention.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being part of this project.

The information that we collect from this research project will be kept private. Any information about you will have a number or pseudonym on it instead of your real name. Your school and district administrators will not have access to the information you share. Only the researchers will know what your number or pseudonym; the information will be locked in a file cabinet or on a password protected computer.

Identifiable data gathered will be destroyed a year after completion of the study. Identifiable data includes papers with real names of participants or case site. These documents will be shredded and identifiable computer files will be deleted along with any backup copies of papers and computer files. De-identified data like from transcripts with pseudonyms will be kept indefinitely. In order to be compliant with Northeastern’s research regulations, signed informed consents will be kept for three years after completion of the study.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations, such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board.
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<th>I agree to [have my child] take part in this research.</th>
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<th>Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent</th>
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Appendix I: Informed Consent Document for Parent’s Observation

Northeastern University, Department of Human Subject Research Protection

Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Elisabeth Bennett; Michael Giurlando
Title of Project: Response to Intervention: A qualitative case study at an urban elementary school in New Mexico

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Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You are being invited to take part in this research, because we feel that your experience as a parent or guardian can contribute to our understanding and knowledge in implementing Response to Intervention at the elementary level. Your knowledge and experiences may help school organizations support students more effectively and guide staff in dealing with organizational changes, resulting from implementing Response to Intervention.

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Observations will typically take place in the Contigo Elementary School. Only the researcher will be present for the observation. My role will be explained at the beginning of the meeting. Any Consent concerns or issues will be discussed with the researcher in the beginning of the meeting.

The researcher will only observe the meeting and take notes, but you will not be identified in the study. The researcher will not write down any personally identifying information about the student/child or the parent or guardian. The researcher will select a pseudonym. The information provided will be kept confidential.

By signing this form, you are acknowledging you understand that you are allowing the researcher to observe you in this setting. The researcher is focusing on the process, not individual child or parent. Therefore, the researcher will not be interacting or asking questions during the meeting, only observing it.

You are not only signing on this consent form for yourself. As the parent or guardian, you are also signing it for your child.

**Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?**

The observation will be at your school or at a place and location convenient to you. The observation may be a meeting of professionals or a parents’ meeting with staff. The observation will take as long as the allotted meeting time, but these meetings usually will take 30-60 minutes.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

There are minimal risks or discomfort in sharing information. As a participant, you should feel comfortable sharing only what you want us to know. If you share some personal or confidential information by chance or that you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics, you can skip the question or stop the observation at anytime. We do not wish for this to happen. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the observation. You may ask the researcher to leave the observation if you feel the question(s) are too personal or if talking about them in the meetings with the presence of the researcher makes you uncomfortable.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefit to you. However, your participation is likely to help others learn how effective school organizations function and adapt to new, complex changes like Response to Intervention.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way or any individual as being part of this project.

The information that we collect from this research project will be kept private. Any information about you will have a number or pseudonym on it instead of your real name. Your school and district administrators will not have access to the information you share. Only the researchers will know what your number or pseudonym; the information will be locked in a file cabinet or on a password protected computer.

Identifiable data gathered will be destroyed a year after completion of the study. Identifiable data includes papers with real names of participants or case site. These documents will be shredded and identifiable computer files will be deleted along with any backup copies of papers and computer files. De-identified data like from transcripts with pseudonyms will be kept indefinitely. In order to be compliant with Northeastern’s research regulations, signed informed consents will be kept for three years after completion of the study.
In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations, such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You do not have to participate in the study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There are minimal risks of harm to you if you participate in this research study. If you participate in this research, no compensation or payment will be provided.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Can I stop my participation in this study?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Michael Giurlando at <a href="mailto:giurlando.m@husky.neu.edu">giurlando.m@husky.neu.edu</a>, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact the Principal Investigator Dr. Elisabeth Bennett at <a href="mailto:El.bennett@neu.edu">El.bennett@neu.edu</a>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: <a href="mailto:n.regina@neu.edu">n.regina@neu.edu</a>. You may call anonymously if you wish.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Will I be paid for my participation?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You will not be compensated for your participation in this research study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Will it cost me anything to participate?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>There will not be any costs attributed to you for your participation in the study.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is there anything else I need to know?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I agree to [have my child] take part in this research.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of parent agreeing to take part</th>
<th>Print Student’s Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Printed name of person above</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Printed name of person above</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Appendix J: Demographic Survey for Participants

A confidential survey developed in Google Forms through my Northeastern Google Account will be sent to participants to complete.

This survey is meant to get quick information from participants in an RTI study. Thank you for taking time to complete this survey. If you have questions why you received this survey, please contact Michael Giurlando at giurlando.m@husky.neu.edu

You will have an opportunity later to review the findings of the study. Participants will be able to withdraw from the study until their data is entered into the research record. Once the data has been analyzed, it will remain as part of the study.

1. What is your gender?
   - Female
   - Male

2. Are you White, Black or African-American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander, or some other race?
   - White
   - Black or African-American
   - American Indian or Alaskan Native
   - Asian
   - Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
   - Other
   - From multiple races

3. What is your age?
   - 20-29
   - 30-39
   - 40-49
   - 50+

4. What is the highest level of schooling that you completed?
   - College degree
   - Masters degree (M.A. or M.Ed.)
   - Some Masters degree coursework
   - Doctorate of Education degree (D.Ed)
   - Other:

5. How many years have you worked in public K-12 education?
   - 0-5 yrs
   - 5-10 yrs
6. How many years have you worked in this elementary school?
   - 0-5 yrs
   - 5-10 yrs
   - 10-15 yrs
   - 15-20 yrs
   - 20-25 yrs
   - 26+

7. What role do you have in the elementary school?
   - Regular education teacher Kindergarten
   - Regular education teacher Grade 1
   - Regular education teacher Grade 2
   - Regular education teacher Grade 3
   - Regular education teacher Grade 4
   - Regular education teacher Grade 5
   - Interventionists (ELL, Reading Recovery)
   - Special education teacher
   - Special education staff (Speech and Language, Social Worker, O.T., P.T., Gifted, Psychologist, Diagnostician)
   - Related Arts (P.E. Music, Art)
   - Specialists (Special Education Instructional Leader (SEIL), Ed Tech, Instructional Coach, Counselor)
   - Administrator
   - Other:
Appendix K: Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

I, _____________________________, agree to transcribe the interviews for the doctoral research of Michael Giurlando entitled “Response to Intervention: A qualitative case study at an urban elementary school in New Mexico”. I will maintain strict confidentiality of the data files and the transcripts. This includes, but is not limited to the following:

I will not discuss them with anyone but the researcher. I will not share copies with anyone except the researcher. I agree to turn over all copies of the transcripts to the researcher at the conclusion of the contract. I have read and understood the information provided above.

_____________________________ __________________
Transcriber’s Signature Date

_____________________________ __________________
Researcher’s Signature Date
Appendix L: Moderator Focus Group Interview Protocol Template

Moderator Focus Group Interview Protocol Template

I. Information about the Focus Group:

Participants (general): _____________________________
Moderator: _____________________________
Date: ______________________________________
Time: ______________________________________
Place: ______________________________________

I. Survey (Demographics)
• A demographic survey should be completed through a google link and form. If you have not received the link, please let me know and I will resend it to you.

II. Consent and Introduction
• You have been selected to speak with me today because you volunteered to be part of this study and give your perspective on RTI in your school. This research project is focusing on your perspective of RTI considering through your role in the school. Through this study, I hope to gain insight into your perspective and knowledge on how RTI implementation and sustainability was experienced at the school.
• The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of elementary professional staff on how RTI implementation and sustainability affected staff, students, and parents. This focus group should take approximately 1 to 1 1⁄2 hours. The results of this study will be used to make recommendations for future consideration.
• The focus group will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and the interviewee’s identity will be kept confidential when reporting the data.
• All responses will be kept confidential and only a pseudonym will be used in the writing of this study. The tapes will be transcribed by a transcriptionist and the pseudonym will be used to label the tapes. I will be the only one privy to the information and the tapes will be destroyed after they are transcribed.
• In order to meet the human subject requirement at the university, you must sign the human consent form (give the form). Basically this form states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and that you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm on you (give time to review form). Do you have any questions about the focus group process or the form?
• Participants will have an opportunity later to review the findings of the study. As noted in the informed consent, a participant may stop participating in this interview. Participants will be able to withdraw from the study until their data is entered into the research record. Once the data has been analyzed, it will remain as part of the study.
III. Ground Rules
There are some ground rules I would like to review to ensure that everyone feels comfortable in this group.

• Please listen respectfully to participants’ comments.
• Please try to speak one at a time.
• All comments are confidential to this group; please do not share with others outside this group.
• We want people to feel comfortable sharing.
• There are no wrong or right answers in this discussion. Every person's experiences and opinions are important.
• A survey will be given where you will select your pseudonym and provide demographic like age, role, educational level, years implementing RTI.

I will begin recording this interview at this time.

IV. Question Sequence

Use a flip chart to explore RTI implementation in the school. Staff will respond by writing responses on the flip chart and talking aloud through the questions presented.

R1 How did an urban elementary school in New Mexico implement an integrated RTI model?
   1. How has the staff been trained on the RTI framework and its essential components (tiered instruction, universal screening, progress monitoring, and data-based decision making)?

R2 How did the implementation of the integrated model of RTI change teaching practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?
   2. Describe how has RTI has impacted your students, your instruction, and collaboration?
   3. Has the RTI process stayed the same or changed over time?
R3  How did implementation of an integrated RTI framework change leadership practices in an urban elementary school in New Mexico?

4. Who were the leaders of the RTI implementation in the beginning? Now?
5. What type of supports helped you feel more comfortable with RTI?
6. What caused problems with implementation? How significant is that problem now? How has this issue evolved?

Ending Question/debriefing (Additional Experiences and perceptions)

7. Knowing what you know now, how would you approach RTI implementation?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience within your school with respect to RTI implementation?

May I follow up with you if I have any questions or need clarification on anything after the interview?

Turn recorder off.

III. Wrap Up and Thank Participant for Time

• Thank you very much for your time today. I appreciated hearing your insights on this topic.
• Is there anything I did not ask or things that I should do differently in the next focus group (if applicable)
Appendix M: Observation Protocol Form

Rationale
Observations will focus on how the RTI program runs. Observing teachers working together to support students and receiving instructional coaching and professional development are elements in an RTI framework.

Goal
Observations will provide insight into the teamwork, school culture and professional learning in addition to expectations for supporting all students within an RTI framework. Observations will be of the one of the following meetings: grade level PLC meeting; SAT Meeting; Professional Development or Coaching Meeting.

Date of Observation: _______________  Duration of Observation: _____________
Researcher: ________________________  Observation #: ____________________

Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 1</td>
<td>Classroom teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher 2</td>
<td>Instructional Coach</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Descriptive Notes  Reflective Notes
Appendix N: Email Letter Requesting RTI Documents

Date: December 1, 2017

Dear Executive Director of Elementary Education and School Principal,

My name is Michael Giurlando and I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University. I am preparing to conduct research for my dissertation under the direction of my advisor, Dr. Elisabeth Bennett. I desire the opportunity to study educators’ perceptions at an elementary school in your district due to its strong student growth for all students and its implementation of an integrated RTI framework. The purpose of the study is to examine and analyze educator’s perceptions and changes caused by the implementation RTI.

This letter is a request for specific documents and others that you may feel pertain to this study on RTI implementation. Some documents that are relevant to this study are RTI manuals, school intervention guidelines, SAT manuals, and curriculum and instruction emails and information around RTI implementation or one of the core components of RTI like new curriculum and assessments that would be used for instruction, progress monitoring, data-based decision making, and universal screenings.

The specific documents that I am requesting are listed below:

1. most recent RTI manual used in the district and elementary schools
2. most recent RTI policy or explanation for RTI implementation for elementary schools
3. most recent SAT manual utilized by the district and elementary schools
4. Document or emails notifying staff of expectations for assessments, including both universal and progress monitoring assessments in both social and academic areas

5. Most recent PBIS information regarding expectations and implementation

6. Documents related to curricular adoptions and rationale by the district and recommending committees

I appreciate your willingness to provide this documentation for this study. Feel free to contact me at giurlando.m@husky.neu.edu, if you feel that are other documents that may be relevant to this study’s focus on RTI implementation or have questions in regard to this request.

Sincerely,

Michael Giurlando

Doctoral Candidate

Giurlando.m@husky.neu.edu

Cell: 832-722-5568
Appendix O: Contigo RTI Implementation Timeline

Table 14 below chronicles the impact RTI had on the school since 2004 to the present. It documents the curriculum changes and RTI processes and procedures that evolved over time at Contigo Elementary School. The table 14 notes year of implementation, what was implemented, how it was affecting RTI, who initiated change, why, how, and any other pertinent information about the implementation.
### Table 14

**Contigo RTI Implementation Timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>What</th>
<th>Tier 1 and Tier</th>
<th>Who</th>
<th>Why</th>
<th>How</th>
<th>Other information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016-2019</td>
<td>NM DASH</td>
<td>Tier 1 and Tier 2</td>
<td>NM PED</td>
<td>Public education department changed school improvement plans to focus on 90 day cycles of student performance</td>
<td>Administrators and identified teachers receive training; schoolwide focus and effort by SLT, SAT, and CTTs</td>
<td>Focus of NM DASH at school CTTs 2018-2019 school year Tier 2 and Tier 1a 2016-2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>students may take all assessments in classroom rather than in lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019</td>
<td>Chromebooks into K, 1st, 2nd and 3rd Tier 1 instruction and assessments</td>
<td></td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Differentiate for students and provide more individualized instruction and intervention</td>
<td>PD training in August of school year and follow up with teachers on early release Wednesdays</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>students may take all assessments in classroom rather than in lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019</td>
<td>New Pacing Guides for ELA and math programs</td>
<td>Tier 1</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Buildings requested input into how to implement and adjust core programs to ensure students receive consistent instruction and timely instruction due to testing windows.</td>
<td>Instructional Coach reviews with teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019</td>
<td>CTT and NM DASH</td>
<td>Tier 1 and Tier 2</td>
<td>Instructional Coach</td>
<td>New Mexico DASH (Data, Accountability, Sustainability and High Achievement) is a 90-day improvement plan for a</td>
<td>The principal, AP, instructional coach, and CTTs will focus on student work, key assessments, and tiered instruction; more</td>
<td>monthly meetings lead by instruction coach on instruction and student work; change to data analysis and more structure to morning CTT meetings by</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

...
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>Tier</th>
<th>Training Location</th>
<th>Building Understanding of Foundational Reading Skills with a Heavy Focus of Dyslexia</th>
<th>PD/Training Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>Dr. Fierro</td>
<td>Tier 1 and Tier 2</td>
<td>District Training, Grade 3</td>
<td>Building understanding of foundational reading skills with a heavy focus of dyslexia</td>
<td>Spring and Fall PD, ongoing training for all professional staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-2018</td>
<td>Dr. Fierro</td>
<td>Tier 1 and Tier 2</td>
<td>District Training, K-2 teaches</td>
<td>Building understanding of foundational reading skills with a heavy focus of dyslexia</td>
<td>Two years of training; Read to Lead grant awarded from state to fund outside expert consultation and support the district’s efforts to improve reading instruction and review curriculum materials. Trainings in building held on PD days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>Heggerty</td>
<td>Tier 1 instruction</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Implemented reading phonics and phonemic awareness program for K-2 because ReadyGen Core program does not instruct in these skills well enough</td>
<td>PD training in Spring of school year on early release Wednesday, District looked at reading assessment data and made the decision to supplement the core reading program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>Chromebooks</td>
<td>Tier 1 instruction and assessments</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Differentiate for students and provide more individualized instruction and intervention</td>
<td>PD training in Spring of school year on early release Wednesdays, students take all assessments in classroom rather than in lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Istation in math K-5</td>
<td>universal screening and progress monitoring</td>
<td>Building</td>
<td>Contigo Elementary School piloting the assessment tool</td>
<td>Building administrator wanted a progress monitoring tool for math; normed assessment; voluntary K-5; K-2 is using; special education teachers; some 3rd and 5th grade teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-2017</td>
<td>ReadyGen (Core program) and ReadyUp (intervention) SPIRE (Tier 3)</td>
<td>Tier 1, 2, and 3 instruction</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Adoption that met NM standards for Common Core; Pearson trainers trained the school trainer; school trainer trained staff people</td>
<td>ReadyGen training on early release Wednesdays and PD days; special</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-2017</td>
<td>Google Platform</td>
<td>Tier 1</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>collaborative platform to share instructional lessons, monitor and store student work and projects, communicate with families regarding student performance and work</td>
<td>Building professional development on early release Wednesdays by Ed Tech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-2017</td>
<td>West Virginia Reading First Phonics Lessons</td>
<td>Tier 2</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>address students reading development gaps</td>
<td>Reading Interventionists trained by district</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shift away from whole language philosophy to teaching phonics and phonemic awareness; still used LLI whole language instruction for students that needed this intervention.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2016-2017</th>
<th>Seven Habits of a Leader</th>
<th>Tier 1</th>
<th>Building</th>
<th>Connected Seven Habits of Leaders of Sean Covey into daily life of school</th>
<th>Building PBIS and Lighthouse Committee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2016-2017</th>
<th>Sounds Sensible</th>
<th>Tier 2</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Address students reading development gaps</th>
<th>Reading Interventionists trained by district</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2016-2017</th>
<th>Revisit site based RTI process and new procedures, including SAT</th>
<th>Tier 1; Tier 1b; Tier 2</th>
<th>District</th>
<th>Reviewed student success in core program with leading researcher and determined changes need to happen across each tier of instruction to meet foundation reading skills. New documents provided specific and targeted skill identification, monitoring, and assessment.</th>
<th>Read to Lead grant awarded from state to fund outside expert consultation and support the district’s efforts to improve reading instruction and review curriculum materials.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

- Observed after another school that began implementation's Tier 1 met with administration to gain support; began introducing tickets for behavior expectations and student role models into the school days; set attendance targets in current year.

- Sounds Sensible® provides hands-on instruction in the most reliable indicators of reading success: phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and understanding letter-sound relationships, as well as handwriting. Our unique 5-step lessons are structured and sequential for the mastery of 20 consonants and short a. Sounds Sensible can be completed in 6-8 months.

- Professional development in building the beginning of the year. Ongoing SAT and RTI training each year for staff and facilitators in multiday training.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Program/Process</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Trainings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016</td>
<td>process in building</td>
<td></td>
<td>and development that aligned to ELA and math Common Core standards and social emotional developmental needs</td>
<td>Trainings in building held on PD days. Teachers in building were trained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016</td>
<td>5th grade pre-algebra class Tier 2 and Tier 3 Building 5th grade pre-algebra class for gifted and high achieving students</td>
<td>Building</td>
<td>5th grade pre-algebra class for gifted and high achieving students</td>
<td>If student lacks understanding on Eureka pre-unit assessment, will receive main lesson of instruction from regular education teacher for 15-20 minutes and then go to enrichment pre-algebra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016</td>
<td>New testing process for gifted eligibility New procedures and documents</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>State mandated a change in practice. The assessment, KBIT and WISC, the district used did not meet compliance expectations so the district chose one of the methods approved by the state. The FTAP is now used for screening second grade students and determining a pool of students to determine eligibility in third grade</td>
<td>Trainees trained diagnosticians and teacher of the gifted on assessment and process teacher of the gifted trained and worked with second grade teachers to determine possible second grade candidates for gifted eligibility in third grade and testing; ongoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Program/Intervention</td>
<td>Tier</td>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>PARCC Assessment</td>
<td></td>
<td>NM PED</td>
<td>with alignment to CCSS state adopted summative assessment for grade 3-12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>Thinking Maps</td>
<td>Tier 1</td>
<td>District Training K-5</td>
<td>Thinking Maps® are eight visual-verbal learning tools, each based on a fundamental thinking process and used together as a set of tools for showing relationships. Thinking Maps® give you and your teachers a common language for meaningful learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>Common Core State Standards</td>
<td>Tier 1</td>
<td>NM PED</td>
<td>NM PED adopted Common Core Standards K-12. State or District Plan to phase into elementary and then secondary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>Eureka</td>
<td>Tier 1</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Math adoption met the NM Common Core standards and expectation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Program/Screening</td>
<td>Tier/Level</td>
<td>District/Source</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>Standards based report cards; grading</td>
<td>Tier 1 instruction</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Needed to align standard based report to new common core standards for 4 and 5 grades; grading and matching skills and standards; created rubrics for grade levels by content;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>NWEA K-2 universal screening</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Previous used in grades 3-12 but District decided to use the universal measure K-12. K-2 began to use it for their students and curriculum.</td>
<td>Diagnosticians who do student evaluations liked that it was normed. Supported general educations effort to better identify at-risk students in the lower grades.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>Standards based report cards</td>
<td>Tier 1 instruction</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Needed to align standard based report to new common core standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>DIBELS universal screening and progress monitoring</td>
<td>NM PED</td>
<td>Reading assessment mandated by the State to be given for all students in K-3</td>
<td>Universal screener in reading and supported progress monitoring of identified students in below level (yellow) and behind (red)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Tier</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Details</td>
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<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>Master Schedule Changes</td>
<td>Tier 1</td>
<td>Building</td>
<td>Administration with consultation from SLT created a new master schedule that established long core blocks of ELA and math instruction along with an intervention RTI block for each grade level. District provided instructional minute guidelines for both subjects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>Common Core Standards</td>
<td>Tier 1</td>
<td>NM PED</td>
<td>NM PED adopted Common Core Standards. State or District Plan to phase into elementary and then secondary. Mathematics instructional shifts include: focus, coherence, fluency, deep understanding, applications, and dual intensity. English Language Arts (ELA) instructional shifts include: focus on informational text, text complexity, text-dependent questions and tasks, evidence-based writing, and academic vocabulary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-2013</td>
<td>Collaborative Coaching Teams (CTTs) morning meetings</td>
<td>Tier 1</td>
<td>Building</td>
<td>Principal wanted administration to be able to attend, support, and monitor CTTs better; established a monthly morning for each</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Period     | Program/Initiative      | Tier   | Organization | Description                                                                 | Professional Development
<table>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>NWEA 3-12 universal screening</td>
<td>District</td>
<td>Grades 3-12 used universal screener in math and ELA to identify students at risk and make curriculum and instructional decisions to meet student’s individual needs</td>
<td>Professional development in buildings</td>
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<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>SAT documents Tier 2</td>
<td>NM PED</td>
<td>State reviewed and updated expectations and procedures for schools</td>
<td>Building professional development</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008-2019</td>
<td>CTTs Tier 1 &amp; Tier 2</td>
<td>Building</td>
<td>Grade level teachers and administrators review student performance data to identify curriculum and instructional adjustments, target individual students needs intervention and possible SAT referral</td>
<td>Building professional development Afternoon CTTs which administrators had a hard time attending due to all the grade levels meeting at the same time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>Three Rs Tier 1</td>
<td>Building</td>
<td>Being respectful, being responsible, and being ready when school started our PBIS program.</td>
<td>Building implemented</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005</td>
<td>PBIS Tier 1</td>
<td>Building</td>
<td>Second Step program introduced and used in Contigo Elementary School</td>
<td>Guidance counselor provides support and instruction on social and emotional skill development in the</td>
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<tr>
<td>before 2004</td>
<td>PLCs; grade level meeting</td>
<td>Tier 1 and low students</td>
<td>Building/District</td>
<td>look at data and student growth</td>
<td>always had grade level meetings but they evolved into CTTs</td>
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<tr>
<td>school for new teachers and all students</td>
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