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Teachers' Perceptions of Implementing Response to Intervention in Meeting Academic Needs of At-Risk Students in Kindergarten through Second Grade.

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Second Grade

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by

Tammy C. Valentine

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' Perceptions of Implementing Response to Intervention in

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Second Grade

by

Tammy C. Valentine

The passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement

Act (2004) increased educators' awareness of Response to Intervention

(RTI) as a means of providing high-quality instruction and interventions

matched to student needs. The challenges that came with RTI were

meeting every student's need, implementing scientific research-based

interventions, and expecting mastery of grade-level standards.

The purpose of this study was to create a foundation of knowledge

through exploratory case study interviews in 4 rural school districts in East

Tennessee. All participants were certified teachers of kindergarten, 1st

grade, or 2nd grade students. The guided interview approach was used to

identify teachers' perceptions of implementing RTI in the classroom. The

research questions addressed quality of RTI professional development

activities, meeting RTI criteria of at-risk students, supporting role of

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administration, RTI impacting or benefiting students' academic growth, and effectiveness of RTI in the classroom.

The findings of this study revealed all participants perceived RTI was necessary in meeting all students' needs. Teachers did not perceive RTI useful only for at-risk students but for every academic level of student in the classroom. However, to implement RTI effectively, teachers' perceived it beneficial to have a literacy coach or reading specialist in the building and to have administration's support. Recommendations for implementing RTI successfully were based on the data analysis.

DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my family. To my daughters, Veronica Stott, Jennifer Loveday, and Kayla Valentine, for their unconditional love, support, and encouragement; even though they thought Mom had been in school long enough. To my grandson Lane Stott whose contagious smile and desire just to play makes all this worthwhile. To my parents Jimmy and Nancy Norton whose lives demonstrated that honor is found in hard work and sacrifice. To my dear and best friend, Mickey Ricker, who without his support, I would possibly have not accomplished a personal goal. I would also like to dedicate this study to my work family, Sevierville Primary School Staff, who served as cheerleaders throughout this study with many encouraging words on a daily basis.

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to ensure that I complete this study. Finally, I acknowledge all educators

who contributed to this study and work to meet students' needs.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Change is a condition one does not easily accept, yet it is constant in education. Laws, polices, procedures, curricula, texts, school dynamics, personnel, teaching strategies, and methodologies change. However, classroom teachers may resist change. According to Fullan (2001) resistance occurs because teachers are only thought of as implementers of change instead of collaborators. A quote by Fullan (1993) more than a decade ago has continued to be an unrivaled description of change in our current educational system.

> It is no longer sufficient to study factors associated with the success or failure of the latest innovation or policy. It is no longer acceptable to separate planned change from seemingly spontaneous or naturally occurring change. It is only by raising our consciousness and insights about the totality of educational change that we can do something about it. (Fullan, 1993, p. vii)

Educational change has been a learning experience for everyone involved (Fullan, 2001). For more than 3 decades laws such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA), and The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) have been in place to support a quality education for students, especially *at-risk students* who have not progressed at the same rate as their peers. These laws have addressed educational equality for all children (Heumann, 1994). Continual attention to student needs and teacher concerns has prompted changes in these law and policies (Allington & Walmsley, 2007).

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Assuring success for at-risk students in the educational system has been addressed in the changes. Accountability and high-quality instruction have been identified through laws and policies, which has ensured students' progress in deficit areas (Allington & Walmsley, 2007).

Carney and Stiefel (2008) conducted a study that concluded school personnel have had the responsibility of identifying, learning, and implementing interventions that meet individual needs of students who have been at-risk for academic failure. Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) identified classroom teachers as being the most accountable for student success. Yero (2002) emphasized teacher participation as the most important aspect to student success. The classroom teachers' work load according to Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) has become complex and much has been expected of them. If teachers have an impact on changing the conditions surrounding the classroom, they can impact change in the classroom (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1996).

Change has been produced when classroom conditions have provided every child the same level of attention for an equal learning opportunity (Graham, 2009). Teachers have collaborated to meet students' need, which has been credited for changing classroom conditions (Hardman & Dawson, 2008). A specifically designed core curriculum, grouping, or levels based on students' individual abilities were described as changes teachers have made to accentuate students' learning in the classrooms (Allington & Walmsley, 2007).

A primary school classroom could be described as consisting of students with individual learning styles and needs creating a variety of developmental levels and abilities (Garner, 2007). Regardless of student diversity in the classroom, every child and teacher have high expectations for achievement based on core curriculum instruction (Riley, 2002). In a classroom where teachers have based instruction on students' ability level, three levels of students have typically been identified (Allington & Walmsley, 2007). One level of students has been identified as the high achievers. The core curriculum has been enriched with challenging, above grade level instruction with expectations of these students completing post-high school. Another level of students has been the average students or the middle level. The core curriculum design has been at grade level with limited enrichment activities and expectations of these students completing high school and entering the work force. Students struggling significantly below grade level have been considered as at-risk students or the low level. Teachers have expected the core curriculum to require significant amount of instructional focus and reflective planning for this level of students (Jackson, 2009).

Academically at-risk students have required accommodations, modifications, and interventions. These terms have been used interchangeably in the educational setting, but the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) specifically defined each term as it related to special education (Dufour, DuFour,

Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010). Response-to-Intervention (RTI) has been

associated specifically with IDEA, although it has been implemented as a

general education intervention. According to Fuchs and Mellard (2007)

implementing RTI works with students where they are and not waiting for

them to fail. The intent of RTI has been to prevent students from

developing a sense of learned hopelessness (Appelbaum, 2009).

Teachers implementing RTI have identified at-risk students' and their

academic deficit areas to provide interventions that accommodate the

students' learning style. Research-based interventions according to the

National Reading Panel have provided data and supported the rate of

students' progress (Hall, 2008).

A challenge of RTI has been implementing accommodations,

modifications, and interventions within the time constraints of the school

day while meeting all students' needs (DuFour et al., 2010). Educators

have been responsible for adjusting the daily schedule so that all aspects

of the curriculum have met the needs of at-risk students in their

classroom. Allington (2009) acknowledged at-risk students have continued

to struggle because they have received less appropriate academic

instruction per day than do grade-level students. Grade-level texts have

challenged at-risk students because the readability has not been at an

independent or instructional level. Educators have been challenged to

consider the idea that at-risk students have difficulty learning solely from a

textbook (Allington, 2009). Therefore, educators have questioned if

textbook accommodations, modifications, and interventions have been used to ensure high-success academic gains for at-risk students (Hardman & Dawson, 2008).

Significance of Study

Regardless of their academic abilities all students have had the right to receive an education in the least restrictive environment (US Dept. of Ed., 2000). This environment has been described as the general education classroom where students with and without disabilities have received grade-level instruction to the maximum extent appropriate based on students' needs (Heumann, 1994). Teachers in Tennessee have been expected to teach the adopted curriculum while attending to the unique needs and individual learning styles of each student (Allington & Walmsley, 2007).

RTI has been viewed as a reformation for general education, requiring educators be more responsive to at-risk students (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2008). For this reform to have documented success, teachers have been provided professional development activities defining the multiple tiers or tiered-instruction of RTI within the general education classroom (Fuchs et al., 2008). RTI tiers have increased intensive, evidence-based instruction with the intent of having documented academic progress for at-risk students. The ultimate goal of RTI has been

for more students to grow stronger in academics and fewer students to be identified for special education (Fuchs & Fuchs 2005).

This qualitative research case study of kindergarten, first grade, and second grade teachers' perceptions of implementing RTI was conducted to create a foundation of knowledge if teachers perceive RTI meets at-risk students' needs. Data from interviews have been analyzed to determine if implementation of RTI has been perceived by teachers to meet the needs of at-risk students in their classrooms. According to Allington (2009) it has become easier to close the achievement gap of at-risk students in primary grades than upper grades because the achievement gap has not been as significant.

Background of the Study

Students with disabilities have been assured a free appropriate public education (FAPE) with the enactment of EHA in 1975. The law was amended in 1990 and became more commonly known as IDEA (US Dept. of Ed., 2000). The amendments have emphasized parental involvement with students' educational programs and *mainstreaming* disabled students into the regular education setting. The term mainstreaming has evolved into *full inclusion* and has eventually become *inclusion*. Inclusion classrooms have been designed for general and special education students learning in the same setting (Rangel-Diaz, 2000).

Reauthorization of ESEA in 2001 with NCLB emphasized a higher standard of accountability in state and local educational systems. The accountability for academic success of all students including the disabled has been based on using high-quality assessments aligned with state standards (NCLB, 2001). Parent involvement has been maintained and students have been ensured a high-quality education by holding schools accountable for having met reading needs of low-achieving students in high-poverty schools (NCLB, 2001).

Based on the statement of purpose outlined in NCLB (2001), IDEA (2004) was amended. Teaching at-risk students with deficits in core curriculum areas have continued in the least restrictive environment (i.e. general education classroom). The amended Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEIA) has promoted accountability in helping children learn, enhanced parental involvement, encouraged the use of proven practices and materials, provided more flexibility for teachers, and reduced the paperwork burden for teachers, states and local school districts (IDEIA, 2004). Alignment of NCLB 2001 and IDEA 2004 has promoted school-wide reform and has endorsed the use of scientific research-based instruction. Professional development has provided opportunities for students to receive challenging academic content (NCLB, 2001). President George W. Bush stated in Executive Order No. 13,227:

> The education of all children, regardless of background or
> disability…must always be a national priority. One of the most

important goals of my Administration is to support states and local communities in creating and maintaining a system of public education where no child is left behind. Unfortunately, among those at greatest risk of being left behind are children with disabilities. (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002, p. 7)

Joe Fisher, Tennessee State Director of Special Education, issued a memorandum detailing significant revisions IDEIA had made in the eligibility determination for students with specific learning disabilities (Fisher, 2005). State criteria for determining specific learning disabilities (LD) with IDEA had required using the regression-based discrepancy method. This method has been described as a difference of at least 1.5 standard deviations between students' intelligence quotient (IQ) and their predicted standard scores on an individualized academic achievement test. Mr. Fisher's 2005 memorandum stated that regression-based discrepancy method could not be the only way to identify LD students. Changes to Tennessee state guidelines for meeting LD eligibility have required RTI data to prove a student's lack of response to research-based interventions (Fisher, 2005). According to Fuchs and Fuchs (2005) RTI has provided struggling learners immediate services and interventions with increasing intensity.

A common understanding and language among educators and psychologists have been considered necessary in determining successful progress toward meeting LD students' needs at an early age (Flanagan, Oritz, Alfonso, & Dynda, 2006). Harry and Klingner (2007) have posited that school systems devote extensive resources to implementing RTI

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instead of finding out if students have disabilities. Educators have been informed to use available resources to assess students' instructional needs and teach them accordingly (DuFour et al., 2010). Documentation of students' progress has required collaboration among educators and psychologists to develop a mutual understanding of RTI. Successful implementation of RTI has become evident when everyone has worked cooperatively, used the resources, and provided evidence of students' academic progress (DuFour et al., 2010).

Statement of the Problem

At-risk students have continued to struggle in core curriculum subjects even though the intent of IDEA reauthorization (2004) was to provide early interventions and "prevent long-term academic failure" (Applebaum, 2009, p.3). Students' academic levels in classrooms have varied from above grade level to below grade level. Response to instruction has been based on their learning styles and unique needs. Implementing RTI has identified at-risk students and addressed their needs (Applebaum, 2009).

RTI implementation, teachers' perceptions of RTI, and to what extent students experience frustration before providing support services have been questioned. Kovaleski (2007) reported RTI has required students receive interventions in their identified academic deficit area. A collection of consistent data for 6 to 10 weeks has provided evidence of

students' response to the intervention. Based on teachers' perceptions, has RTI identified students who were once considered *slow learners* and provided more academic growth for at-risk students? The purpose of this qualitative study has been to explore teachers' perceptions of implementation of RTI in meeting the academic needs of at-risk students in kindergarten through second grade.

Research Questions

Six research questions have served as the focal point of this qualitative study.

1. What are teachers' perceptions of implementing RTI (RTI) in meeting the needs of at-risk students in kindergarten through second grade?

2. What are teachers' perceptions of professional development activities provided to prepare them to implement RTI? What additional professional development activities could be suggested to more effectively prepare teachers to implement RTI?

3. What are teachers' perceptions of administrators' role in implementing RTI?

4. How does the classroom teacher's perception of RTI impact the use of and effectiveness of RTI the classrooms?

5. According to teachers' perceptions of students in their classrooms, how are students determined to be at-risk and meet criteria for RTI?

6. What are teachers' perceptions about benefits or impact of RTI on academic growth of at-risk students?

Limitations and Delimitations

A limitation of this study was that all the districts involved in this study were not using RTI as a method for identifying students as learning disabled (LD). RTI was providing data to be considered as a component of the comprehensive evaluation process for LD identification. This limitation resulted from IDEA (2004) giving states and districts the choice to move toward implementation of RTI as a method of identification.

This study was delimited to a maximum of 15 interviewee participants chosen by the principals of schools in Blount, Cocke, Hamblen, and Sevier County school districts. The criterion for participation in this study was to be a certified kindergarten, first grade, second grade, or primary grade teacher in a rural school district with knowledge and experience of implementing RTI.

The interview instrument may have created a limitation for this study and prevented educators from being participants to provide details of RTI implementation within their classrooms. The interview questions had been designed as reflective, which may have required participants to devote significant time to the study. A questionnaire may have taken too

much of the educator's time to complete. Therefore, the study was delimited through the use of interviews.

Definitions of Terms

The following list of definitions assist in understanding the research and data compiled for this study. The terms are common education terminology.

1. *Academic deficit areas* are core curriculum subjects in which students are not progressing to grade-level expectations (Hall, 2008).

2. *Accommodations* refer to the actual teaching supports and services that the student may require to successfully demonstrate learning. Accommodations should not change expectations to the curriculum grade levels (Watson, 2009).

3. *Achievement gap* is the discrepancy in academic performance between groups. NCLB identifies nine groups of students for comparing academic performance and their achievement gaps (EPE Research Center, 2004).

4. *At-risk students* are those who are not progressing at the same rate as their peers on grade level. They require more intensive small-group or one-on-one instruction to make progress in acquisition of skills (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009).

5. *Differentiated instruction* is proactively, planned, varied approaches to what students need to learn, how they will learn it, and how they can express what they have learned in order to increase the likelihood that each student will learn as much as he or she can as efficiently as possible (Tomlinson, 2003).

6. *Intelligence quotient (IQ) is* an intelligence test's score derived from standardized psychological tests of an individual's capacity to learn. The test results provide a score compared to the same age group (Watson, 2009).

7. *Interventions* are accommodations, modifications, or use of alternate materials to address at-risk students' academic deficit areas; use will document students' progress of grade level skills. "A specific type of instruction used to help with a specific type of problem" (Mellard, McKnight, & Deshler, 2007, p. 10).

8. *Mainstreaming* is IDEA's preferred placement of exceptional students. Placement of exceptional students is to be in the least restrictive environment, which is defined as the general education classroom (Watson, 2009).

9. *Modifications* are changes made to curriculum expectations in the lessons, assignments, grouping, or grades to provide a more successful rate of growth for at-risk students in academic subjects. Modifications may be simple or complex depending on the student's performance (Watson, 2009).

10. *Learning disabilities* is defined by IDEIA 2004 as a learning deficit in which the child despite being provided with appropriate learning experiences and instruction does not achieve adequately for the child's age or meet state-approved grade-level standards in one or more of the following areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading fluency skills, reading comprehension, mathematics calculation, or mathematics problem solving (Buffum et al., 2009. p. 211)

11. *Learning styles* refer to how students acquire information, evaluate it, and then examine their findings. Learning styles are visual, auditory, kinesthetic, or a combination (Silver, Strong, & Perini, 1997).

12. *Least restrictive environment* as required by IDEA is: to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily {20 U. S. C. §1412 (5) (B)}, (Wright, & Wright, 1998/2010).

13. *PL 94-142* is the Education of All Handicapped Children Act passed in 1975. It required schools to be proactive in identifying and granting children with disabilities appropriate public educational programs. It ensured that students with disabilities were not excluded.

14. *Probes* are interview strategies used to verify or extend the researcher's intuition and ideas developed by the participants (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Probes are questions or comments that follow-up something already asked (Merriam, 1998, p. 80).

15. *Response to Intervention* is the practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student's need. Progress is monitored frequently to make changes in instruction. Student data are used in making important education decisions (Elliott, 2008).

16. *Tiered Instruction* is instruction that occurs in levels, beginning with Tier 1 instruction occurring in the general education classroom. Tier 2 is instruction received generally in small-group with more intensity. Tier 3 instruction increases in intensity as the teacher is generally working with one student at a time. Student progress is monitored and charted in each Tier (Mellard et al., 2007).

Overview of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 contains the introduction to the study, significance of the study, historical background, statement of the problem, research questions, limitations and delimitations, definitions of terms, and an overview of the study.

Chapter 2 provides a review of literature relevant to RTI. It includes research and reference materials related to perceptual research, historical overview of education, general education, and special education reform initiatives. It also includes an overview, core principles, details of research-based studies, professional development activities, and a summary specific to RTI.

Chapter 3 contains the explanation of the methodology used to conduct the study. This chapter includes information about the research design, research questions, interview questions, participants, instrumentation and data collection process, actions taken to ensure reliability, data analysis, and a closing summary.

Chapter 4 details the results. Its contents consist of introduction of participants, the data analysis, participants' responses to each of the six research questions, details related to emerged themes, and a summary.

Chapter 5 encompasses a discussion of the findings through a summary, conclusions, findings, recommendations for implementing RTI, and recommendations for further study and research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ralph Waldo Emerson has said, "In a world of infinite choice, people are struggling to figure out what to do" (www.leading-learning.com.nz). This idea has continued in education today as evident in various education reforms enacted at the federal, state, and local levels (Riley, 2002). Throughout the years the focus of education has been to provide students access to a caring, competent, and qualified teacher in an organized school emphasizing support for students' success (Darling-Hammond, 2006). It has been more than a century ago that John Dewey (1900/1968) stated:

> What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy (p. 19).

This same thought has been supported by Buffman, Mattos, and Weber (2009), as they have pointed out the future of our nation is dependent upon the strengthening of schools, empowering of teachers, and ensuring high levels of learning for all students.

It has become a common belief among educators that all students can learn; dialogue has occurred when students were not learning (Buffman, Mattos, & Weber, 2009). When the proficiency bar has been raised to close the achievement gap, the concept has changed from "all students can learn to all students must learn" (DuFour et al., 2010, p. 14).

This has become the catch phrase because NCLB requirements for schools and districts have emphasized a commitment to high levels of learning for all students (DuFour et al., 2010). Curriculum standards have become more rigorous and the bar on assessments for determining level of proficiency has been raised. Every effort has been made to close the achievement gap as educators have used whatever methods, strategies, or technology it has taken to ensure student success (Dufour et al., 2010).

Federal regulations stated "RTI hinges on the child's response to scientific, research-based intervention" (Federal Register, 2006, p. 46544). However, a lack of agreement on the criteria to use in certifying an intervention as research-based has persisted (Wright, 2007). Information in literature has described methods and how to use interventions ranging in intensity to address student's needs (Wright, 2007). This review of literature has focused on meeting the needs of at-risk students in public education with the emphasis on implementation of RTI. An overview has connected RTI with the use of research-based interventions, addressed the levels of intensity to address student's needs, and summarized methods for implementing. Core principles have been listed and described. Results from studies on implementing RTI and professional development activities have been reviewed. Importance of perceptual research, a historical overview of education, general education initiatives, and special education reform initiatives has been incorporated in the literature review.

Perceptual Research

Review of literature on perceptual-research has been included in this chapter as a description of a specific research technique. It has been reviewed to assist in understanding teachers' perceptions of this topic. This section is included because perceptual research has become more acceptable in the educational setting.

Public officials, taxpayers, educators, and parents have expected the best from schools and success for students. These stakeholders have not been afraid to ask hard questions with the anticipation of answers involving real change in education (U. S. Department of Education, 2008). Through use of interviews in perceptual research controversy has been tolerated and unrestricted. Stakeholders have accepted facts as open to discussion and perceptions as unwavering (Berliner, 2002).

Qualitative research in education has been crucial in gathering data and other means of dependable evidence for engaging in open conversations about educational issues and knowledge of particulars (Berliner, 2002). Phenomenology has directed an interest in understanding specific social phenomena from participants' perspectives and describing the world as experienced by the subjects (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The basis of perceptual research has been unobstructed conversations, which has enticed interest in questions, arguments, and answers (Simpson, 2006). These three components have been taken and woven together to create elements of inquiry and reflection. The

perceptions based on interpretation of participants' views have created arguments and cases to be studied (Simpson, 2006). Studies have used perceptual research to prompt teachers to question what they think they know and to encourage discussion. Teachers' perspectives have been captured through this process and have added to an understanding of dialogue that shapes the school (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005).

Perceptual research framework has required participants to have personal experience with the study (Bulterman-Bos, 2008). The importance for educators has been acknowledging what is high-quality for students. However, in perceptual research the goal has become to completely understand the nature of the problem and not just the solution. Teachers have become the experts, speaking with authority on teaching and the educational process (Bulterman-Bos, 2008). Teachers as participants have been considered experts and their contribution has preceded discovery of new insights. Participants' knowledge must have been personal but about reality (Bulterman-Bos, 2008). There has remained an assumption that the important reality was what people perceived it to be (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

Why study teachers' perceptions? The reason has been linked to vibrant settings and diversity of people (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Perceptual research has produced knowledge that has provided a different and valid glimpse of reality in the education setting. As teachers'

perceptions have been studied, researchers have set the boundaries that have developed into exploratory case studies with artifacts to further the development of the targeted area of information (Slekar, 2005).

People have become storytellers, narrating their own experiences and those of others in perceptual research (Lincoln, 2005). An acceptance for the role of language and a thick, rich description related to emotion, feeling, caring, and connection to the topic of study has been created. Reality has become life that has been lived, experienced, and told beyond the observed and inferred. What has been said has significance as the dialogue between the researcher and interviewee has become very important (Lincoln, 2005).

Podell and Tournaki (2007) have indicated studies have not taken into consideration teachers' characteristics in reacting to students. A suggestion has been made that teachers' perceptions have been affected by the special education labels attached to students. Based on evidence from studies teachers' academic predictions have been influenced by social behaviors (Podell & Tournaki, 2007). This has raised the question of whether irrelevant information has been used in their decision making. Real-life situations have divulged the extent of how true teachers' perceptions have aligned with the object of the study (Podell & Tournaki, 2007). Emphasis has been given to qualitative studies exploring attitudes, opinions, and beliefs of people involved in special education and general

education. The studies have examined personal reactions to special education contexts and teaching strategies (Brantlinger et al., 2005).

Knowledge that has been required for teachers cannot be learned from books alone but must have been created in practical situations by teachers (Bulterman-Bos, 2008). Knowledge has become existent when perspectives, settings, and techniques have been explored (Brantlinger et al., 2005). A difference has been made to a discipline and those who have become dependent on it (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Therefore, perceptual research in education has become a necessity (Bulterman-Bos, 2008) as the interviewing process has produced knowledge worth knowing (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Studies of teachers' perceptions have provided knowledge of dynamic educational methods contributing to improved practices in classrooms (Bulterman-Bos, 2008).

Historical Overview of Educational Reform

A review of education in America has found federal education acts (i.e. ESEA, 1965; EHA, 1975; ADA/IDEA, 1990; NCLB, 2001) have addressed effective practices in the educational setting. Each federal act has indicated diversity of all children's needs must be dealt with. A continuous challenge of managing diversity in education has been placed on the legislative system (Riehl, 2002) because the United States Constitution did not specifically acknowledge education. The Preamble provided an implication for the support of education (Article 1, Section 8)

in the clause 'promote the general welfare' (Mount, 1995). However, the language in the United States Constitution reserved educational power for the states (Dennis, 2000). The 1st, 8th, and 14th Amendments to the United States Constitution indirectly related to education. Freedoms of speech, religion, press, and assembly has created awareness in education of others' rights. The freedom of life, liberty, and property with equal protection and due process has been assured. The right to be treated without cruel and unusual punishment has been secured when power was given to the people (Mount, 1995). The 14th Amendment influenced the concept of segregation in relation to education and had an impact on the Civil Rights Movement. In several court cases (i.e. *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896; *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954) the 14th Amendment was referenced as it related to segregation in public schools. Violations of rights and rulings of court cases have impacted education (Wright, 1998, 2010). The concept of separate but equal had been declared as not acceptable and had no place in education (Wright & Wright, 1998, 2010). The privileges or immunities of citizens have been condensed (www.usconstitution.net).

Expectations of providing equity and social justice have been the focus of education; consequently educators for more than a century have served a diverse student population (Riehl, 2000). Consistency in guidance and resources from federal mandates for states and local school districts has been a struggle (Podmostko, 2001). Narrowly focused rules,

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regulations, and accountability with broad-gauged change had begun at the federal level as civil rights of students had been introduced (Darling-Hammond, 2006). The concept of school reform had been launched with general education initiatives and had moved into special education (Podmostko, 2001). Throughout history school reform has addressed curriculum, systemic restructuring, closing the achievement gap, and promotion of equity through financial equalization (Podmostko, 2001).

Educational Reform had been set in motion as early as 1930 when the concept of slow learner had been used to identify students with low intellectual abilities (Allington & Walmsley, 2007). Between 1950 and 1980 the use of separate buildings or obscure areas in the school to teach slow learners and *mildly handicapped* students had increased. An emergence of culturally disadvantaged and economically disadvantaged terminology had surfaced to explain why these students had not made adequate progress (Allington & Walmsley, 2007).

The Civil Rights Movement has resulted in litigation impacting education. The laws have provided specialized teachers and programs because economically disadvantaged students have been acknowledged as requiring assistance (Graham, 2009). The milestone case was *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). This case ruled equality for all students because segregation led to diminished opportunities and unequal access (Foster, 2003). The diversity of academic levels has encouraged teachers

to become more attuned to educational needs of students. Foster (2003) stated:

> If students are to come to an appreciation for the diversity that enriches the fabric of their country…they must find it in their schools in principals and teachers who mirror that diversity in ways that are meaningful to them in the day-to-day routine of school life. Educators must openly and consistently fight against any practices that seek to strengthen or support, by purpose or default, segregated education (p. 47).

The quote confirmed the flawed opinion of "schools being okay, it was the children who need help" (Darling-Hammond, 2006, ¶61).

Learning disabled was codified into law with EHA (1975) and minimum competency standards were emphasized through *Back to the Basics* (Allington & Walmsly, 2007). Identification of students as LD and implementation of competency standards has closed the achievement gap between on-grade level and at-risk students but has not provided evidence of students reading and writing well enough to be contributing citizens of society (Allington & Walmsley 2007). Students' lack of ability to read and write had become a significant concern that led to a focus of federal expenditure for the economically disadvantaged. It was with the passage of ESEA (1965) that *Chapter 1*, the largest federal expenditure program, was created. Chapter 1 has provided additional federal funds to schools with a large percentage of economically disadvantaged students (Allington & Walmsley, 2007). Over the course of 20 years students having been served through this program decreased from 8.3 million to 4.6 million. The decrease according to Allington and Walmsley (2007) has

been attributed to EHA of 1975. There has been a shift from ESEA funding to EHA funding and specialized teachers have been hired to address students' academic weaknesses (Allington & Walmsley, 2007).

The Hawkins-Stafford Amendment reauthorized Chapter 1 in 1988, making it more accountable and results-oriented (Allington & Walmsley, 2007). Chapter 1 programs had to show growth in achievement or be reviewed by federal programs' audits. Academic gains had been sustained over time with pretesting in the fall and posttesting in the spring. Testing had become focused on reading comprehension and not just word recognition. The program had been designed to accelerate progress in the classroom by supporting, extending, and reinforcing teacher instruction (Allington & Walmsley, 2007).

The two major Acts, ESEA and EHA, have provided federal funds for educational equality of at-risk students considered difficult to teach and in need of additional resources. Often schools and districts have been unable to provide for these students without funding (Allington & Walmsley, 2007). IDEA, reauthorization of EHA in 1997, has brought more special education educational reform with emphasis on a results-oriented system (Buffman et al., 2009). Disabled students have been required to participate in state-mandated testing to determine if student's progress has been satisfactory or proficient. IDEA recognized academic progress of students as an important aspect of a results-oriented system and allowed 5% of Part B funding to be used for school-wide early prereferral

interventions. IDEA was reauthorized in 2004 with more emphasis on results-oriented approach and increased Part B funding to 15% for school-wide, early prereferral interventions.

IDEIA (2004) established LD can be identified by a process that determines if a child responds to a scientific, research-based intervention (Buffman et al., 2009). This process (IDEIA, 2004) has become more commonly known as RTI. State education agencies have been mandated by IDEIA (2004) to provide local education agencies a choice between using the discrepancy formula and using RTI (Hall, 2008). The discrepancy formula has been defined as comparing a student's cognitive aptitude of IQ with academic achievement assessment. The comparison has been made to find underachievement in one academic area and strong abilities and skills in other academic areas (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007).

General Education School Reform

School reform has no specific definition but has related to coherent and comprehensive changes in schools at the local level. These changes have governed policies and teaching strategies (Chatterji, 2002). School reform initiatives have ranged from access to education for all students, to emphasizing improvement in student achievement, and using scientifically-based research practices (Chatterji, 2002).

Education for all students was brought to the public's attention in the 19th century (Thattai, 2006). The public or common-school reformers

had reasoned education would develop good citizens, unify society, and prevent crime and poverty. As a result education was mandated for all children in the 19th century.

In 1867 the Federal Department of Education was created to gather information to help the States establish effective school systems. The Second Morrill Act, in 1890, gave the Office of Education the responsibility of support for land-grant colleges and universities. The Smith-Hughes Act in 1917 and later in 1946 the George-Barden Act encouraged vocational training in agriculture, industry, and home economics for high school students and university students. During this time frame families felt the financial and educational impact caused by World Wars I and II. The effect of environmental factors on the education system and attainment of high achievement levels had created discussion, which led to implementation of counseling programs and administration of individual and group standardized testing (Ballantyne, 2002). Students had entered the *educational ladder* at the lowest rung, 1st grade, and few made it to the highest rung, 12th grade (Ballantyne, 2002, ch. 3, fig. 23). However, the few that had made it to the top had continued their education in college and had filled the growing ranks of upper and middle professional classes (Ballantyne, 2002). Congress enacted the following Acts as a result of information learned. The Lanham Act in 1941 and the Impact Aid Laws of 1950 were enacted to impact education and assist with the burden of communities affected by the presence of the military (Sadker, D., Sadker,

M., & Zittleman, 2007). These Acts have been helpful and have addressed certain needs for schools and communities but have not been comprehensive in nature.

Comprehensive federal education legislation, National Defense Education Act (NDEA), was passed in 1958. The ultimate purpose was to improve science, mathematics, and foreign language instruction at all levels of elementary and secondary schools (Sadker et al., 2007). Seven years later in 1965 a major educational reform, ESEA, was launched. This Act has provided states a comprehensive program to assist disadvantaged children in urban or rural areas. The most familiar program with this Act was the Title I program. It has provided teachers, assistants, materials, equipment, and supplies to schools identified as Title I schools (Allington & Walmsley, 2007). Additional resources have been intended to provide more equitable opportunities of learning for students (Darling-Hammond, 2007). However, demographics in society, public opinion, and changes in government leadership have led education policymakers to amend ESEA (Wadsworth & Remaley, 2007).

Education Initiatives

The concept of our nation's education system being at risk was addressed and brought to the public agenda more than 25 years ago (Casey, Bicard, D., Bicard, S., & Nichols, 2008). How the public viewed school reform has been seen through a variety of predetermined ideas

based on their experiences with teaching and learning. Blake (2008) used

an analogy of school reform and blind men (the public), who after having

heard the report of need for school reform had latched on to various

concepts deemed the most important. These included furthering political

gains, supporting democratic values, learning basic skills, following

directions, holding teachers accountable, acquiring state revenue, and

creating academic equity (Blake, 2008). America's education initiatives

have included creative learning with stakeholders at every level working

together to ensure an education of rigor, excellence, and excitement

(Riley, 2002). The analogy by Blake (2008) continued with the public

debate over which idea was right, only to have summarized education

initiatives as all were correct and all were wrong.

A Nation at Risk, 1983

In 1981 the Secretary of Education, T. H. Bell, formed the National

Commission on Excellence in Education based on the "perception that

something was seriously remiss in our educational system" (A Nation at

Risk, 1893, p. 5). Mr. Bell established this Commission based on his

responsibility to provide effective leadership, constructive criticism, and

valuable assistance to education systems. The Commission was charged

to:

- evaluate the quality of teaching and learning in the public

  education sector;

- compare American education with that of other advanced nations;

- study the relationship between high school graduation requirements and college entrance requirements;

- assess the degree to which educational and social change has affected student achievement; and

- define problems that must be overcome to successfully pursue excellence in education (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

The report began by stating our nation was at risk due to mediocrity within the educational setting. Other nations (i.e. Japan, South Korea, and Germany) had been matching and surpassing our educational accomplishments. Competitors had become well-educated and determined. The world had become one global village not isolated countries (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Students have moved into the *information age*, and learning is a crucial investment for success. For the first time in history the educational skills of one generation have not surpassed or equaled the previous generation. Students have not become more literate but have been exposed to more mathematics, literature, and science than a generation ago. Even with this exposure the graduates of our high schools and colleges today have not been as well-educated as graduates 25 to 35 years ago, when a smaller

percentage of the population graduated (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

According to this report our education system had been created during the industrial era, resembling an assembly line. All children had been put on the same plane of progress in mastering the information taught regardless of their abilities. All students had been expected to master the skills in the same time frame. Students had to begin school at age 5, attend school for 180 days per year for 13 years, and progress had been based on the amount of time students spent in the classroom (Levine, 2009). Twenty-five years after the report, we have learned this approach no longer makes sense. All students have not learned at the same rate (Levine, 2009). The message of the report has been clear in stating a need for school standards; however, it has overlooked how to achieve these standards. There has been a need for standard outcomes not a standard process (Levine, 2009). Education systems have done the reverse (Seely, 2009).

The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) had gathered information from students, teachers, industrial workers, parents, and state education officials for the Secretary of Education's report (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Stakeholders' had provided input of hope and frustration. Hope had been in the quality of education. Frustration in poor quality had often been reflected in schools and colleges. There had been frustration in young people's lack of

preparation after graduation from high school and graduates not having been prepared for the work force or college. Hope had been found in search of solutions to ensure excellence through educational reform (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

Excellence as defined by The National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) had characterized an educational setting that had set high expectations for all learners and had made all possible attempts to help students reach them. The report had stated fairness and high-quality in education must have been practiced without compromising either principle or practice (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Schools had been given the directive to expect and assist all students to work to the limits of their capabilities that led to a commitment of life-long learning (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

A Nation Prepared, 1985

It was only 14 months after the report, *A Nation at Risk,* was delivered to the American people, that an advisory council from the Carnegie Forum on Education and Economy was established to investigate the link between economic growth and a well-educated society. *A Nation Prepared* was the result of their investigation. The report called for significant changes in teacher preparation with a challenge to the nation of preparedness instead of risk. *A Nation at Risk* report has

been addressed as "twenty years of educational reform, progress, but plenty of unfinished business" (De Leon, 2003, p.1). Darling-Hammond noted that "teaching is the profession upon which all professions rest" (as cited in De Leon, 2003, p.2). *A Nation Prepared* stated the pursuit of excellence in education was not for the *faint-hearted*. The report emphasized redesign and revitalization of the teaching profession that included development of a new professional curriculum focused on systematic knowledge of teaching. Additionally, the establishment of a national board for professional teaching standards was recommended. The board was to provide advanced certification for teachers based on their achievement of high standards for what they need to know and be able to do. (De Leon, 2003)

The development of a performance-based assessment process to determine whether teachers had met the standards created a system in which the participants could trust. Even with this long-term commitment to change *A Nation Prepared* emphasized that no progress, no program, and no one strategy could achieve instant national reform. Educational reform had demanded identification of major problems and ideas for change that had moved the nation into a *to-do* mind-set and addressed the question of *what can we do.* America's educational system had been challenged. School reform success had to attend to the improvement of teaching (De Leon, 2003).

According to De Leon (2003) America has remained educationally at-risk but the reform movements of the past 20 years have not been futile. Research has given insight into how children learn and what constitutes good teaching. John Gardner's quote, "what we have before us are breathtaking opportunities disguised as insoluble problems" (p. 18) has been considered the unfinished business of education (De Leon, 2003).

Goals 2000: Educate America Act (P. L. 103-227)

Goals 2000 brought about reform in academic standards and student achievement. The reform was based on the belief that students achieve at a higher level when more is expected. The framework of Goals 2000 was to identify world-class academic goals, measure student progress, and provide support needed to meet the standards. There were eight goals associated with this Act. These included:

- school readiness,
- school completion,
- student academic achievement,
- leadership in math and science,
- adult literacy,
- safe and drug-free schools,
- access to professional development, and
- parental involvement (www.ncrel.org).

These eight goals became National Education Goals. The first goal read: "By the year 2000, all children in America will start school ready to learn." Early childhood advocates' opinion was reflected through this goal (www.ncrel.org). The goal also increased the nation's awareness of how influential early childhood experiences were on school performance. It stressed that readiness did not reside with the children but with families, schools, and communities.

Professional Development was emphasized in Goals 2000. In order for teachers to translate research into valuable classroom practice, effective professional development was crucial. Teachers were provided the opportunity to study, reflect upon, and apply research on teaching and learning. An effective type of professional development within the schools was the establishment of professional learning communities. This type of professional development has allowed teachers to collaborate on topics related to learning new material correlated with academic standards, to construct knowledge in a holistic way, and to discuss strategies for reaching struggling students as the information has been implemented (www.ncrel.org).

No Child Left Behind Act, 2001

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001(NCLB), was a reauthorization of ESEA. It has been described as the most ambitious initiative in American history (Dufour et al., 2010). Two basic underlying purposes of

NCLB (2001) have been improving student academic achievement and transforming school cultures so that every student succeeds by the year 2013 (Hardman & Dawson, 2008). Other principles of NCLB have included giving choices to parents of students in disadvantaged areas, emphasizing research, evidence-based high curriculum standards, and concentrating an emphasis on accountability or high-stakes testing (Donlevy, 2002). If students have not met expectations or performed on grade level, schools and educators have been held accountable by the federal government for their failure (DuFour et al., 2010; Hardman & Dawson, 2008).

Principles of reform movements in the past have emphasized education equity to all. NCLB principles have defined equity to more than just being in the classroom. Equity of outcomes has been among student groups and all students have received quality educational programs (Donlevy, 2002). Ensuring all students have achieved academically with rigorous standards in place has presented a challenge to educators. The concept of education just being accessible to all has no longer been acceptable; too many students have been *left behind* (Haycock, 2006). NCLB has created obstacles for educators, as an awareness of the expectations have significantly impacted their ability to implement creative program initiatives and teaching strategies in the classroom (Donlevy, 2002; Lewis, 2002). However, the energy, attention, and resources being used in the educational setting have begun to close the achievement gap among the student groups (Haycock, 2006).

Tehrani (2007) has stated much controversy still remains about the mandates of NCLB. Teachers have become "enraged with the law's reliance on high-stakes exams that leads…to focus relentlessly on boosting scores rather than pursing a broader vision of education" (Tehrani, 2007, para. 13). NCLB mandated all students in public schools be proficient in the areas of reading and math by 2014 (NCLB: A Desktop Reference, 2002). Tehranai (2007) has strongly suggested federal policymakers benefit from listening to those who work daily in our nation's schools.

Education reform initiatives have been federally mandated but not supported through federal funds (Haycock, 2006). NCLB through Title 1 programs has enhanced the flexibility for states, school districts, and schools in the use of federal funds (NCLB: A Desktop Reference, 2002). Tehrani (2007) has stated for every dollar spent on United States schools, the federal government has contributed nine cents. This contribution has defined how success will be measured, how interventions will be used to address failure, how qualifications for teachers will be determined, and how reading will be taught in classrooms (Tehrani, 2007). Educators' voices across the nation have resonated for fewer directives and a real commitment to assist states and districts struggling to meet these mandates (Haycock, 2006).

Special Education Reform and Civil Rights Initiatives

Special Education Reform began in the early 1960s when concern was voiced with reference to the inequitable treatment of students. Equalization has been defined by Sadker et al. (2007) as allowing every student an educational opportunity to fully develop that student's talents, interests, and abilities without regard to race, color, national origin, gender, disability, or economic status through educational policies that are just, fair, and free from bias and discrimination. Ironically, court cases have brought about considerable change in education. The court case *Plessy v. Fergusson* (1896) introduced education reform with its *separate but equal* ruling. The ruling from the court case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) created additional educational reform because it established segregated schools were unconstitutional (Foster, 2004). Government has become obligated to look at school reform to address very specific needs of children in a more detailed approach, leading to an era of Special Education (Blake, 2008).

The Civil Rights' Movement of the 1960s began a transformation in the education of all students. Laws and policies have been addressed mandating the merging of Regular Education and Special Education. These led to the passage of PL 94-142 or Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, now referred to as IDEA. Education initiatives have continued to address the inequalities in America's schools (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Funding, class sizes, textbooks, technology, facilities,

and curriculum have remained unequal in schools across the country (Darling-Hammond, 2006).

Eggleston (2009) identified *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) as the court case that defined separate but equal. This case alleged that segregation deprived the plaintiffs of equal protection under the 14th Amendment. The U.S. Supreme Court decided the concept of separate but equal had no place in public education. The expectation that students were best educated in separate facilities was ruled as inequitable education. These decisions manifested changes in education policy at the federal level (Clabaugh, 2007). This case according to Hardman and Dawson (2008) has caused states and school districts to re-examine their policies on segregation and equality of education for all students. A successful educational experience that has met the diverse needs of all students has relied upon all stakeholders grasping the understanding that all students mean our students and there has been no place for segregated education (Foster, 2004).

Special Education has provided resources for teachers, services for students, and support for parents since 1975 with PL 94-142. At present RTI has been perceived as a special education reform, but in reality it has been a general education reform initiative (Brown-Chidsey, 2007). Interventions and documented progress have become a required component of the eligibility criteria in identifying LD students, connecting RTI to special education (IDEIA, 2004). RTI has provided a bridge to the

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gap of general and special educators working together. As result

interventions have been used meeting all students' needs (Brown-

Chidsey, 2007).

Professional development activities have encouraged collaboration

on implementing RTI. However, a concern has been professional activities

have involved school psychologists and those closely working with special

education even though general educators have been mandated to

implement RTI (Richards, Pavri, Canges, & Murphy, 2007). General

education teachers have related inadequate training as a drawback in

implementing RTI (Richards et al., 2007).

Fullan and Hargreaves (1996) surmised that too much educational

reform and restructuring was destroying teachers' confidence, draining

their energy, consuming their time, and taking away their hope. Leaders

have been challenged with implementing the current educational

reformation, creating teacher buy-in, empowering teachers, and

emphasizing effective instruction (Waddell & Lee, 2008). Reform has

created reflection on educational practices and ensured the provision of

differentiated instruction to meet all students' needs. Everyone in the

school working together to ensure students' success has resulted from

reform (Fuchs et.al. 2008).

Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142)

A concept throughout the 20th Century implied the purpose of education was only for those who had potential and an aptitude to learn (Hardman & Dawson, 2008). The inequity in educating children continued until 1975 when the federal government enacted EHA. This Act initiated more change in education policy and discussion of ensuring access to education for students with disabilities (Hardman & Dawson, 2008). EHA guaranteed a free, appropriate, public education for all students with disabilities because every child is capable of learning (U. S. Department of Education, 2008).

Changes have been evident in education based on EHA. Identifying children with disabilities, evaluation of success, and provision of process have resulted from the changes (U. S. Department of Education, 2008). Students with disabilities have attended school with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) designed to meet their academic, social, behavioral, or adaptive needs. Concern within the education community has developed and conversations have occurred in relation to fairness, equality, preparation, and location (U. S. Department of Education, 2008).

Students with disabilities have not been excluded, in compliance with EHA, and their education has been provided in the least restrictive environment (Buffman et al., 2009). Children have struggled in schools according to Senge (1994) because the way they have been taught has been incompatible with the way they learn. EHA has purposed to assure

all children with disabilities an education emphasizing special education

and related services that have met their unique needs. Assuring students'

rights have been protected has been proposed through EHA as

assistance in providing the education has been given to states and local

school systems. Additionally, EHA has assured stakeholders that no

reason has existed for children to continue to struggle because the

effectiveness of efforts in teaching children with disabilities has been

assessed (U. S. Department of Education, 2008). Specialized teachers

and resources for a diagnostic-prescriptive plan have been available to

meet at-risk students' needs within their educational setting (Allington &

Walmsley, 2007).

Regular Education Initiative of 1986

Madeline Will, then Undersecretary of Education, launched an

initiative focusing on mainstreaming or inclusive education of special

education students. This initiative introduced the belief that regular

education was not fulfilling its responsibility to special education students.

Students received a *fragmented* education as they were pulled from

regular education classrooms to go to special education classrooms. With

the Regular Education Initiative (REI) Will called for close collaboration

between regular education and special education to meet students' needs.

Concepts resulted from REI were all students are more alike than

different, so good teachers can teach all students. The idea was for the

program to go to the students and not the students to the program

(Allington & Cunningham, 2007). Segregation of students in the education

setting should not have occurred, which has been defined as

discriminatory and inequitable (Kavale & Forness, 2000). Thus, the terms

mainstreaming and inclusion have emerged. Special education students'

academic deficits have been addressed in the regular education setting by

a special educator (Kavale & Forness, 2000).

Debates have continued concerning labeling, stigmatizing of

students with disabilities, and whether image or perception has become

the measure of truth even with the passage of EHA (Kavale & Forness,

2000; Semmell, Abernathy, Butera, & Lesar, 1991). Advocates of REI

have argued that special education has presented a multitude of

problems, which has included discrimination and lowering academic

standards (Kavale & Forness, 2000). Opponents have implied REI has not

been research-based and if implemented without consideration of the

students, serious harm could come to students REI intended to help

(Semmel et al., 1991).

This concern prompted Semmel, Abernathy, Butera, and Lesar

(1991) to conduct a study of whether teachers' perceptions were critical

components of REI. A sample size of 310 regular classroom teachers, 71

special educators, 11 administrators, and 38 ancillary personnel were

surveyed from 6 schools in southern California and 16 schools in northern

Illinois. Their data indicated educators, special and general, were overall

not dissatisfied with the current special education delivery system. A high

percentage of respondents perceived students with mild disabilities in the

regular classroom had a negative impact on classroom instructional time.

Their perception was one of not being skilled to modify the curriculum to

meet students' needs. Success was based on special educators and

general education teachers agreeing on the initiative's initial design of

giving all students the right to grade level curriculum (Semmel et al.,

1991).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, (IDEA)

EHA was reauthorized in 1997 and became known as IDEA (U. S.

Department of Education, 2008). IDEA favored a results-oriented system

instead of emphasizing philosophical and compliance issues.

Understanding regulations was of utmost importance and schools were

held accountable for following them. However, IDEA stressed that

academic progress students made was of equal importance. It was in

IDEA that school systems were granted the allowance to qualify students

for special education based on RTI. Although these concepts and

provisions were introduced, it did not change the practices (Buffman et al.,

2009). In July 2001 a committee formed by President George Bush made

three major recommendations to IDEA: (a) to focus on the results not the

process, (b) to embrace prevention and not failure, and (c) to involve

students with disabilities who receive extra services through special education in general education first (Hall, 2008).

Congress amended IDEA in 2004 with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA 2004), which no longer mandated individual states to require local districts to use the IQ-achievement discrepancy approach for identifying LD students (Wright, 2007). A federal regulation in IDEIA 2004, § 614, allowed local educational agencies to identify students as LD using a process to determine if student responded to scientific, research-based intervention as part of the evaluation procedures. It specifically stated the student be provided appropriate grade-level instruction in a regular education setting, taught by qualified personnel, and frequently monitored for progress in academic deficit area (Federal Register, 2000).

A State Department memorandum in 2007 described the IQ-achievement approach as *waiting for the child to fail* method (Fisher & Bunch, 2007). The memorandum emphasized meeting students' needs through early interventions or RTI (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007). A concentration of providing inclusive schools and inclusion classrooms at the primary school level has become a focus of local school districts (Elliott, 2008). The memorandum mandated development of RTI guidelines used as a process for identifying LD students. RTI has been described as a framework used in the general education setting to address a student's suspected academic deficit area prior to experiencing

failure (Fisher & Bunch, 2007). The use of general education or special

education strategies when implementing RTI has created controversy.

Collaboration between regular educators and special educators has been

required for effective instruction and students' success in the regular

education setting (Podell & Tournaki, 2007).

Response to Intervention

Hall (2008) has defined RTI not as a program or a method for

teaching reading but as a dynamic problem-solving process in which data

have been essential in making decisions about what skills struggling

readers lack and whether intervention instruction provided to date has

been effective. Elliot's (2008) definition of RTI has been consistent with

Fuchs et al. (2008) and Hall (2008). RTI has been defined as the practice

of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student

needs. In this process students' academic progress has been monitored

frequently and data has been gathered to use in decision-making when

referencing changes in instruction or goals (Elliot, 2008).

An advantage of RTI implementation has been increased levels of

collaboration. Shared responsibility for student's success has developed

into the norm rather than the exception (Hilton, 2007; & Mellard et al.,

2007). All students in school have been considered RTI students. Early

stages of RTI implementation in Tennessee resulted in state and district

monitoring. Tennessee's implementation guidelines were open to school

districts' interpretation (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). The Tennessee State

Department of Education, Division of Special Education, required approval

of the local school district's needs-based RTI Action Plan Method of

Identification prior to implementation. A template of essential requirements

in the RTI Action Plan Method of Identification was provided on

Tennessee's Department of Education website (www.tn.gov). The

requirements included vague language, allowed range in interpretation,

and accepted diversity in plans aligned with school districts needs.

Therefore, consistency and requirements of RTI implementation varied

across school districts.

Accuracy of instruction and interventions matched to students'

needs have also been advantages of RTI for students. The differentiation

and intensity of instruction has provided an improved approach to

guarantee academic outcomes for all students (Barnes & Halacher, 2008).

Reliability of implementation has ensured materials and instruction have

been developed, used, and tested to assure effectiveness (Mellard et al.,

2007). Using coordinated and systematic methods of instruction has made

a difference in helping at-risk students to catch-up (Brown-Chidsey, 2007).

Successful implementation of RTI has required educators

participate in effective professional development activities (Fuchs &

Fuchs, 2005). The increase in professional development activities has

been considered an advantage of RTI. Educators have been prepared for

implementing RTI in the areas of data collection and analysis, developing

curricula, and implementing RTI to make certain reliability has been obtained (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). RTI has taken research to practice and substantiated an equal educational opportunity for all students (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008; Brown-Chidsey, 2007).

A challenge of RTI implementation has been perfecting key conceptual issues. RTI has told educators what to think about not what to think. This has presented a challenge as educators are hands-on people and want to know how to implement (Tulley, Harken, Robinson & Kurns, 2008). Teachers' main concern has been on the practice and not the underlying theory (Tulley et al., 2008).

Methodological procedures have been presented as a challenge. The procedures have needed further specificity and study (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007). The existence of validated intervention models and measures to assure instructional validity has been questioned. Tools and resources have been available for some academic areas but not all. The interventions and implementations have occurred at lower grade levels, which have provided more information than for older students (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007).

Consideration of available trained personnel to implement RTI has been a concern to address. The concern has been that trained personnel with knowledge of skills to implement validated instruction or conduct research-based, problem-solving processes have not been accessible. Trained personnel have acquired knowledge and skills to monitor student

progress for interpreting assessment scores and formulating decisions about eligibility for special education (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007).

The challenges associated with initiating due process related to RTI have been the cost, when to start, and parent involvement. Due process initiated early in the identification process has been questioned. If done early students have not been caught in the cycle of tiered-instruction between general education and special education. Discussion of parent input or awareness has continued as part of RTI due process (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007).

RTI Core Principles

Beliefs and core principles have been defined by Hall (2008) as the most important underlying assumptions of a topic. Elliot (2008) has identified research and common sense to support the RTI core principles. Common sense has kept one focused on the most important aspect – student learning (Elliot, 2008). Research has provided evidence on how to implement and limited evidence of effectiveness (Compton, Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bryant, 2006). The basic core principle related to RTI has been that all students can learn. However, it has become important to believe one can effectively teach all children (Elliot, 2008). Based on all students can learn and effective instruction has been used, four fundamental beliefs of RTI have been identified by Hall (2008) as:

- preventive action has been better than using the wait-to-fail approach;

- early intervention has been more effective than remediation later;

- universal screening approach has prevented students from falling through the cracks; and

- tiers of instruction have met the needs of all students.

From these beliefs eight core principles of RTI have been identified that require effective communication for a valuable decision-making process:

- all children can be taught effectively;

- early intervention is the best;

- service delivery uses a multi-tier model;

- within the multi-tier model use a problem-solving model to make decisions;

- intervention and instructions used should be scientific, research-based;

- monitoring of student progress informs instruction;

- decisions are made based on data, which is a data-decision regarding student response to intervention is central to RTI practices; and

- assessment for screening, diagnostics and progress monitoring must be used (Hall, 2008, p.19).

Teachers' acceptance of these beliefs and core principles has ensured all students have equitable access to the core curriculum. RTI has required educators to evaluate their instruction practices and be responsive to needs of all students (Elliot, 2008). Educators' responsibility has become identifying curricular, instructional, and environmental conditions that encourage learning (Elliot, 2008).

RTI Tiers

RTI has been conceptualized as a tiered approach to instruction in meeting the needs of students who have not made adequate academic progress. The number of instructional tiers has varied from state to state; however, RTI has often been associated with three tiers (Azzam, 2007; Elliot 2008; Fuchs & Mellard, 2007; Hall 2008). Tier 1 has been referred to as primary support for students in general education classrooms, a prevention step. Tier 2 has been referred to as intense instruction and intervention, a more concentrated prevention step. Tier 3 has been referred to as intense specialized support for students in general education classrooms, reflecting special education services (Azzam, 2007; Fuchs & Mellard 2007).

Systematic Process of RTI

The multi-tiered model has incorporated a problem solving method as part of the decision making process. Four discussion questions suggested by Elliot (2008) as part of the process were (a) what is the problem; (b) why is the problem occurring; (c) what are the solutions; and (d) did the intervention work.

Several steps in this process have been suggested for consideration (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007). These are:

- screening students;

- monitoring progress;

- identifying those students who require small-group instruction;

- completing a comprehensive evaluation;

- answering individually tailored questions regarding students who did not respond to intense interventions; and

- providing special education services (Fuchs & Mellard 2007).

RTI has focused on providing help to students by examining necessities for a successful learner. Castleman and Littky (2007) expressed the need to start with the student not the subject. Assessments have been administered aligning interventions to students' needs. General educators have taken more responsibility and have become accountable for providing interventions (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007).

Students' interests and needs have become the starting point. With RTI a program has been created that considers how students learn best. When the individual student has been considered, the outcomes achieved are far greater than hoped. Generally these have included love of learning and becoming lifelong learners (Castleman & Littky, 2007).

The idea of finding help through special education has been restricted (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007). RTI according to Allington (2009) has not been perceived as a special education initiative because its goal has been to reduce the number of students referred for special education services. Kovaleski (2007) has identified success of RTI as the extent to which the core curriculum increased the likelihood of meeting goals defined under NCLB in the general education classroom. Administrators and educators have become proactive in implementing RTI as a joint effort among all staff (Kovaleski, 2007). Vaughn (cited in Hall, 2008) stated, "RTI is an opportunity, not a federal mandate" (p.26).

Research-Based Studies Linked to Implementing RTI

Scientifically proven, research-based methods of instruction have become the requirement as outlined in NCLB (2001). However, implementing scientific findings have been difficult because humans have been subject to variables that affect them from day to day. Implications to help schools change have become harder because the context has not been controlled (Berliner, 2002). Three research-based studies linked to

implementing RTI in public schools have concluded: guidelines for implementation was necessary (Compton et al., 2006), tier-level placement and risk status for special education have not been predicted by gender or initial observation (Carney & Stiefel, 2008), and time spent in interventions have reduced unnecessary eligibility testing and costs to a district (VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007).

A 2-year longitudinal study was conducted through Vanderbilt University with the purpose of exploring issues affecting the development of guidelines for classification of students for Tier 2 interventions. The objective was to improve the accuracy of at-risk classification (Compton et al., 2006).

The study was conducted with first grade students classified as at-risk for reading disabilities. The initial sample included 252 Tennessee students entering Tier 2 interventions. Results from universal screening using curriculum-based measurements including word identification fluency, phonemic awareness, rapid naming skills, and oral vocabulary were used as the base predictors. Based on screening results and teacher agreement with results, the lowest 6% of students in individual classrooms were chosen to ensure a large representation of at-risk classified students. The study (Compton et al., 2006) followed 206 students longitudinally through the end of the students' second grade year to assess their variety of reading skills.

Four models were used in the design of the study by Compton et al. (2006). Results were documented accordingly. Models 1-3 provided logistic regression results. Model 4 provided improvement to Model 3.

Model 1 used sound matching, rapid naming, and oral vocabulary skills as a base set of predictors for classifying students as at-risk for reading disabilities. Results from Model 1 found approximately 9% of first grade population or 27.2% of initial risk sample required Tier 2 interventions (Compton et al., 2006)

Model 2 added word identification fluency to the base set of predictors. The results indicated an increase in sensitivity and specificity for classifying at-risk students but were not significant. There were 53 students classified for Tier 2 interventions with 3 second-grade students being missed. This was an increase over Model 1. The results provided evidence to support multiple, probe-based assessments over time to improve prediction of classifying students for Tier 2 interventions (Compton et al., 2006).

Model 3 continued with the base set of predictors but added 5 weeks of level and slope progress monitoring. In this model 50 students were classified for Tier 2 interventions with only 2 second-grade students being missed. Results revealed significant improvement in classification of at-risk students. However, the results appeared unsatisfactory and unreliable because 8% to 9% of first grade students had been classified at-risk and needed Tier 2 interventions (Compton et al., 2006).

In Model 4 the classification tree approach was used. The tree allowed the same set of predictors to interact but used different combinations of risk factors for classification of individuals. This approach found 5% to 8% of first grade students at-risk and needed Tier 2 interventions. Overall 32 students were classified for Tier 2 interventions with no second-grade students being missed. The results of this study (Compton et al., 2006) suggested that guidelines be developed allowing the classification of at-risk students as early as first grade to enter Tier 2 interventions.

Proportions of students initially referred for interventions and received interventions in Tier 1, 2, or 3 were addressed in a 3 ½ year research study (Carney & Stiefel, 2008). The results from this study added to the research base on RTI as a problem-solving approach. The study examined long-term outcomes of success for one group of elementary students involved in Tier 2 interventions (Careny & Stiefel, 2008). The objective for this study was to determine if implementation of interventions prevented or delayed referral for special education services. The study also addressed if the tier-level placement or status of risk for special education at the end of the 3 ½ year study could be predicted by gender or the initial teachers' observation (Carney & Stiefel, 2008).

The study included 43 students in grades K-5 receiving instructional support team intervention services, Tier 2, in the general education classroom. Data were gathered from participants' instructional support

files, report cards, discipline reports, and special education records. At the end of 3 ½ years data on the remaining 32 target students were analyzed (Carney & Stiefel, 2008). Results by placement level indicated 82% of students in year 1 were receiving Tier 2 support. At the end of year 2, 33% were receiving Tier 2 support and 38% at the end of years 3 and 4. These percentages did not reveal the shifting of students between Tiers 1, 2, or 3 throughout the year. The percentages were based on the level of intervention each student was receiving at the end of the year. Tier-level instruction could have been different from the year before based on instructional needs. Long-term results showed 21% of the remaining group was eligible for special education at the end of year 2 and 19% at the end of years 3 and 4 (Carney & Stiefel, 2008).

The study found over one third of students were referred more than once for Tier 2 interventions throughout the 4 years. Results also indicated more than half continued to receive Tier 2 or 3 services each subsequent year. Students were considered to have been successful within the tiered levels of support. Fifty-nine percent were able to function with a limited level of support. Based on this study conclusions were drawn that special education referrals were not prevented or delayed as 15 of the 32 students were referred to special education. However, only 5 of these qualified for special education services. It was also concluded that tier-level placement and risk status referral was not predicted by teacher's initial observation or gender for referral (Carney & Stiefel, 2008).

Discussions from the study related to ambiguity of implementing RTI without policy or guidelines determining measures for students who were not meeting requirements. The students were not responsive to Tier 2 and not eligible for special education. The conclusion was drawn that local school district personnel needed to identify, learn, and implement a wide-variety of interventions (Carney & Stiefel, 2008).

Students have come to school at-risk for learning and requiring attention. The teacher has been required to have an understanding of how to meet each one's need (Carney & Stiefel, 2008). Using problem-solving teams making data-based decisions from curriculum-based measurement educators have been guided in implementing RTI and referring students for special education (VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilberson, 2007). A study was conducted with the purpose of evaluating special education referral process, identification process, and student outcomes (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007). Two critical points were addressed with RTI in this study. The first point related to implementing an integrated set of procedures while correctly applying sequenced guidelines. The focus was on efficiency of individual components and not as RTI as an integrated whole. The second point related to research conducted by well-funded research centers. The focus was on determining if interventions implemented with high integrity by a research-center associate had decreased the need for special education (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007).

A question about the effectiveness of components when implemented by front line educational professionals was associated with this study (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007). This study purposefully examined the use of the RTI model in a school district where prior to introduction curriculum based measurement linked to intervention had not been used.

The study was conducted in five elementary schools during the years 2002-2005 in a growing suburban district in Arizona. Student-to-teacher ratio was 23:1 and disaggregated data was used from five of the NCLB sub-groups' (race, gender, economically-disadvantaged, ELL, special education). Teachers were trained in curriculum based measurement and new teachers were assigned coaches. Controlled variables were used in the study and 54 observations were conducted. Of these 54 observations, 98.76% of teachers used the correct screening procedures and only three teachers required 1 or 2 prompts for correct implementation (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007). The referral process began with the problem-solving team. Baseline data were reviewed and a decision was made if assessment for special education was needed or if interventions were implemented. In the study interventions were controlled variables with the following key components:

- daily implementation in the classroom by the teacher or a peer tutor;
- using leveled instructional materials;
- modeling of correct responses;

- guided practice and independent practice timed for a score; and

- using incentives for improvement (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007).

All interventions were scored daily and tracked on a curriculum based measurement chart for growth. RTI decisions were determined after 10-15 consecutive intervention sessions had occurred. However, an average of 6.68 intervention sessions occurred before a decision was reached determining RTI was adequate and 12.41 sessions occurred before a decision was reached determining RTI was inadequate. The criterion for determining RTI success was provided to an untrained observer along with individual children's data for 56 cases and agreement exceeded 87% (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007).

Results from this study indicated time spent on RTI and effects of RTI reduced unnecessary eligibility testing and costs to a district (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007). The SLD diagnosis decreased from 6% of elementary students to 3.5% students district-wide. An important aspect of any RTI model depended on the decisions based on analysis of data. Validating the decision-making process was critical. The extent that decisions corresponded with data presented a challenge to the success of RTI (VanDerHeyden et al., 2007).

Professional Development

The literature review has indicated effective RTI required leadership, collaborative planning, and professional development. Elliot (2008) has indicated effective RTI has been contingent upon educators being trained in this method. Harry and Klinger (2007) have stated RTI has been effective in preventing academic failure as general and special educators instruct collaboratively ensuring all students received the support necessary for success. Educators have been encouraged to stop looking for disabilities and just "teach the children what they need to know" as noted by Lisa Delpit (2006, p. 3). Professional development activities have no longer been designed to address one-size-fits-all education but have moved toward differentiated instruction (Elliot, 2008). Professional development activities have been recommended to include time students have been academically engaged and learning. Presentation styles of instruction and opportunities for students to respond have been suggested as a consideration when designing professional development activities. Procedures for monitoring learning and teacher expectations have been indicated as important RTI professional development activities. The key to RTI has been effective instruction (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Elliot, 2008).

A common understanding and language among educators and psychologists has led to effective instruction (Flanagan et al., 2006). Consistency in RTI programs has led to successful progress in meeting students' needs at an early age. To document students' progress it has

become important for educators and psychologists to collaborate and have a mutual understanding of RTI (Harry & Klingner, 2007). Successful implementation of RTI has occurred when everyone has worked in cooperation to increase students' academic deficits (Richards et al., 2007).

Harry and Klingner (2007) posit that school systems should have devoted extensive resources to professional development activities regarding implementation of RTI instead of activities related to having determined if students have disabilities. Educators have used resources from professional development activities to assess students' instructional needs and taught accordingly. Elliot (2008) has cautioned to "not bite off more than one can chew. There has not been 'RTI in a Box'. It must be implemented with integrity" (p. 15). Federal government initiatives requiring implementation have typically been conveyed to teachers through specific practices and strategies (Tully et al., 2008). Without professional development, these initiatives have created many questions for the educators. Administrators have given answers and teacher buy-in has been necessary for RTI to evolve in school improvement (Tully et al., 2008).

The RTI framework has introduced a paradigm shift in thinking about assessment and instruction (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007; Richards et al., 2007). The need for a specific and ambitious professional development agenda has been required. Ongoing professional development activities

related to RTI have allowed educators to become fluent with the skills, to understand the process and theory, and to implement accurately (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008).

Summary

RTI has been described as a paradigm shift in the educator's thinking – it must be understood the problem has been in the way instruction has been presented and not the students (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007; Richards et al., 2007; Jackson, 2009). The focus has not been on manipulating students to learn but showing them how to learn and the value of learning. As students have taken ownership of learning, mistakes have been made, frustration has been evident, risks have been taken, and ultimately learning has become a very rewarding activity as the strategies have created more learning (Jackson, 2009). Senge stated:

> All learners construct knowledge from an inner scaffolding of their individual and social experiences, emotions, will, aptitudes, beliefs, values, self-awareness, purpose, and more. In other words, if you are learning in a classroom, what you understand is determined by how you understand things, who you are, and what you already know as much as by what is covered, and how and by whom it is delivered. (as cited in Jackson, 2009, p. 27)

Educators have reflected on RTI and lessons that have unraveled differently than planned. The following thoughts have reflected the reasons for unraveling:

- if only more time had been used,
- if only the students had been smarter, which would have made the task simpler,

- if only there had been more money for resources to have enhanced the lesson, and

- if only families had been more supportive of education (Jackson, 2009).

Change has not easily been accepted by most, and RTI has been questioned by staff because it has necessitated a change in how time has been spent, how instruction has been delivered, and who has worked with students.

The RTI initiative has been a journey, and to make it a less difficult one the administrator must have believed RTI effective (Hall, 2008). Leadership has been described as an essential variable for successful implementation of RTI. The administrator has been described as one who has not jumped on the band wagon but has known why the complex and challenging RTI initiative has been launched (Hall, 2008). The administrator has been strongly encouraged to have prepared and researched RTI so questions can be answered (Hall, 2008).

Based on teachers' input Jackson's (2009) objection has been that even with one's talents, students can only learn to their developmental level, regardless of how much rigor has been stressed in the classroom. High expectations have revealed more details about teachers' effectiveness than about students' abilities. It has become evident that students come to the classroom with many learning needs. Comparing and contrasting students' progress with state curriculum standards at any

point in the school-year has been overpowering. It has become important to determine which standards hold the most significance and to focus on those that have the largest impact on students (Jackson, 2009)

The paradigm shift has changed the focus from what students can do to what teachers can do (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007). Educators have set goals for students that err in quality and in less rigorous standards. The goals have not been based on students' achievement but on the educators' expectations (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007). Educators who have accepted a realist view have worked with students based on their needs and have not created a sense of false hope in learning for the students (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007). RTI has been summarized as working with students where they are and not waiting for them to fail (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007). Furthermore, RTI has prevented students from developing a sense of learned hopelessness according to Appelbaum (2009).

Overview of Study

This chapter provided a review of literature relevant to RTI. It included research and reference materials related to perceptual research, historical overview of education, general education, and special education reform initiatives. It also included an overview, core principles, details of research-based studies, professional development activities, and a summary specific to RTI.

Chapter 3 contains the explanation of the methodology used to conduct the study. This chapter includes information about the research design, research questions, interview questions, participants, instrumentation and data collection process, actions taken to ensure reliability, data analysis, and a closing summary.

Chapter 4 details the results. Its contents consist of introduction of participants, the data analysis, participants' responses to each of the six research questions, details related to emerged themes, and a summary.

Chapter 5 encompasses a discussion on the findings through a summary, conclusions, findings, recommendations for implementing RTI, and recommendations for further study and research.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This chapter describes the design of the research and specific

elements used in the study. This chapter also defines the criteria for being

a participant and the process used in purposeful sampling. The

instrumentation section of this chapter describes the researcher's role,

methods, and process used to gather and record information. The

technique used to analyze data and measures taken to ensure

trustworthiness and internal validity has also been explained.

The motivation for conducting a qualitative case study was that

qualitative research methods have been designed to understand the

phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspective and not the

researcher's (Merriam, 1998). Internal validity in all research has hinged

on the definition of reality. The quote by Becker (cited by Merriam, 1998,

p. 201) defined reality as: "reality is what we choose not to question at the

moment," and "the leading cause of stress amongst those in touch with it."

This study was conducted to create a foundation of knowledge

through exploratory case study interviews to identify teachers' perceptions

of implementing RTI in meeting at-risk students' needs in primary grades.

Based on teachers' perceptions has RTI identified those who were once

considered *slow learners* and provided more academic growth for the at-

risk student? The purpose of this qualitative study has been to explore

teachers' perceptions of implementing RTI to successfully meet at-risk students' academic needs in kindergarten through second grade.

The review of literature has supported the need to gather further information related to teachers' perception of RTI implementation and its effectiveness in meeting at-risk students' needs in primary grades. Current laws, NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004), have strongly supported education of disabled students with nondisabled students in the general education setting. Knowledge and insights related to these laws have been gained from information provided in this study. Information acquired may lend support to schools or districts implementing RTI in planning professional development activities, establishing a tier-method for meeting at-risk students' needs in the general education classroom, recommending adjustments to RTI frameworks currently in place, and implementing RTI professional learning communities.

Research Design

This study was designed and conducted using qualitative research methods. Merriam (1998) defined qualitative research as an umbrella concept that covers several forms of inquiry. Qualitative research has helped us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible.

Phenomenological research has focused on experiences and the participants' real meaning of these experiences (Merriam, 1998). This

study's purpose was to investigate participants' experiences in implementing RTI in meeting at-risk students' needs in primary grades. It also explored teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of RTI, professional development activities, guidelines related to implementing RTI, and to establish if teachers' knowledge and implementation of this framework related to prior studies. In phenomenological research the researcher must have an understanding of the phenomenon being studied but must temporarily set it aside. The researcher investigates to reveal the true meaning of the phenomenon through the experiences of those living it on a daily basis (Merriam, 1998; McMillan & Schumacher, 2006).

Research Questions

Six research questions served as the focus of this study and comprised three subgroups of teachers implementing RTI: kindergarten teachers, first grade teachers, and second grade teachers.

1. What are teachers' perceptions to implementing RTI in meeting the needs of at-risk students in kindergarten through second grade?

2. What are teachers' perceptions of professional development activities provided to prepare them to implement RTI? What additional professional development activities could be suggested to more effectively prepare teachers to implement RTI?

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3. What are teachers' perceptions of administrators' role in implementing RTI?

4. How does the classroom teacher's perception of RTI impact the use of and effectiveness of RTI in the classrooms?

5. According to teachers' perceptions of students in their classrooms how are students determined to be at-risk and meet criteria for RTI?

6. What are teachers' perceptions about benefits or impact of RTI on academic growth of at-risk students?

Interview Questions

The method used in developing the interview questions involved reviewing accessible literature on RTI, state guidelines for using RTI in determining eligibility for learning disabled, and prior conversations with educators and psychologists.

Qualitative data has come from personal interviews with open-ended questions (Merriam, 1998). To guide the study the following open-ended questions were formulated to provide information about the phenomenon. The questions focused on teachers' interpretation and meaning of the phenomenon which provided a rich description of data creating a "unity of the real and the ideal" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27).

1. Briefly share your years of teaching and memorable experiences of meeting at-risk students' needs in your classroom.

This introductory question was devised to provide participants an

opportunity to share information and to ease into the interview situation.

The rationale was that most teachers enjoy sharing stories about current

or former students, therefore creating an atmosphere of comfort with this

question. This question also assisted in garnering additional information to

develop further questions as the interview process continued.

2. Let's briefly discuss the changes in special education laws since

the implementation of PL-94-142. What do you recall as the most

important aspect of the amendment of IDEA in 1997? IDEIA in

2004? The current changes that are in place concerning identifying

and meeting needs of students with learning disabilities?

This question was formulated to move the participant into a mode of

reflection concerning laws and policies.

3. Mr. Fisher, Assistant Commissioner of Education, Division of

Special Education, has sent out memos stating that RTI must be

implemented. In what professional development activities did you

participate to assist or guide you in implementing RTI? When was

each activity taken? Which was the most effective and why?

This question was formulated to gather data pertaining to the participants'

involvement in professional development activities, regarding motivation

and support in meeting at-risk students' needs.

4. Let's discuss RTI. Who is responsible for implementing RTI? How

is RTI implemented in your classroom? How was this determined?

Do you receive support from administration with implementing RTI? Please elaborate.

This question was formulated to help participants focus on components of RTI and their responsibility so that the researcher could determine if their policy leans more toward a Special Education initiative or a General Education Initiative.

5. How are students in your classroom determined to be at-risk and meet criteria for RTI?

This question was formulated to help the researcher determine if tiered-instruction is being used in the classroom and how it is being used.

6. Tell the researcher about data collection for RTI so that progress can be noted. How many data points do you need to determine progress? What interventions do you use to gather these data points? For how long must you gather data points? How are the data used?

This question was formulated to gather data for comparison of policies and guidelines. There has been no predetermined number of data points that must be collected as cited by Federal law. If used to identify a student as LD, each district was authorized to submit a plan for RTI implementation for approval by the State Department of Education.

7. How do you determine if a student responds successfully to RTI? What methods or strategies are used in meeting their needs to determine success?

This question was formulated to help participants focus on their teaching methods and strategies and to afford a reflective mode for the participants.

8. What suggestions would you give a colleague in regards to implementing, documenting RTI?

This question was formulated to serve as a probe to encourage the participant's focus on experiences that were perceived as successful or challenging. It also was formulated to garner information regarding participants' perceptions of possible barriers or setbacks related to building or district level policies.

The questions were designed so the interviewee's responses initiated probes revealing more insight into the study's phenomena.

Participants

This qualitative research study consisted of nine participants who were certified kindergarten, first grade, or second grade educators in four rural east Tennessee school districts (Blount, Cocke, Jefferson, and Sevier counties). Teachers had knowledge of and experience with implementing RTI as a factor in meeting at-risk students' needs and determining eligibility for learning disability. Selection of general education teachers as participants represented purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990). Participants applied the tier model to instruction on a daily basis. This typical case sample represented the phenomenon studied and was not in any way atypical, extreme, deviant, or intensely unusual (Patton, 1990).

To support trustworthiness of this study participants were assured no names were used, no association with schools was used, and labels were assigned to teachers.

Permission to conduct interviews was obtained from Directors of Schools and principals prior to gathering any data. Directors of Schools and principals were mailed or e-mailed a letter stating the purpose and intent of this study along with criteria for being a participant. Each participant was given the interview instrument and asked to participate in a face-to-face individual interview. If they agreed to serve as participants, their contact information including a location for the interview was submitted via e-mail communication. This further ensured trustworthiness and confidentiality of responses in the interviews as participants were allowed to determine if the interview would take place at their school or away from their school.

Instrumentation

The qualitative approach to this study provided the opportunity to have a "conversation with a purpose" as interviewing is the most common means of data collection in qualitative research (Dexter, 1970). This approach allowed exploration of the person's feelings, thoughts, and perceptions. It provided a picture of how the participants interpreted the world around them regarding the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 1998).

Personal interviews were chosen as the primary method of data collection because one cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. One must ask people questions about those things (Patton, 1990). The chosen interview method followed the interview structure continuum, beginning with informal or unstructured to highly structured (Merriam, 1998). There was an understanding that all biases, predispositions, and attitudes were set aside by the researcher (Merriam, 1998).

The interview questions were designed to be reflective and directly related to teachers' interpretations of using RTI in the classrooms. The intent of the questions was to gather information pertaining to participants' experiences of successful moments with at-risk students, perceptions of changes in laws for special education, and applications of RTI in the classroom. Integrated in this study was how the participants designed RTI groups, implemented tiered instruction, and evaluated student success based on RTI implementation. The guided interview addressed the following topics related to RTI:

- Years of teaching and experiences

- Special Education Law and changes throughout the years

- Professional Development training in RTI

- Perceptions of implementing RTI

- Identification of at-risk students

- Perceptions of effectiveness of data collection

- Possible outcomes that could provide suggestions to improve RTI models.

The interviews took place at the interviewees' schools at a time convenient for the interviewees. Follow-up reminders, for confirmation of dates and times of interviews were made via e-mail or phone calls. Prior to the interview each participant was given in written format the purpose of the study along with the research questions. Depending upon the information from the initial interview, follow-up interviews were held. Others who volunteered but preferred to interview through e-mail because of time constraints in their day were given the interview instrument with information regarding dates for completion and method of returning the survey to the researcher.

Data Collection Process

The initial step began with seeking permission to conduct the study from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of East Tennessee State University. Upon approval by IRB, the Directors of Schools were mailed a letter of request for permission to conduct research in their districts. After obtaining written approval from the district level, permission was requested at the school level. A letter of request was mailed or e-mailed to principals of elementary schools explaining the purpose of the research, contact information, and deadline completion. After permission was granted, each teacher was e-mailed a request to participate in the study.

Participants were contacted by phone or e-mail and interview appointments were scheduled.

Prior to the interview, participants were given a written explanation of the research and a copy of the interview questions. Individual interviews were scheduled at a time convenient for the participants and conducted at their schools. Each participant was guaranteed anonymity and given a label to ensure confidentiality and accuracy of the information collected.

The interviews were conducted one-on-one and rapport was established with a brief overview of the purpose. This overview explained the intent of the study and assured participants of their confidentiality. Explanation of the informed consent form and any questions for the researcher were addressed. The participant's signature was obtained on the informed consent document and verbal permission obtained to audio-tape the interview for accuracy. Each interview was tape recorded for convenience and accuracy in transcribing all data.

Field notes were taken during the interviews and used in the transcribing process to provide reflective information and to be used in data analysis. Field notes (a) give verbal descriptions of the setting, people, and activities; (b) provide direct quotations or substance of conversation; and (c) provide observer's comments in the margins or in a running narrative (Merriam, 1998).

Interviewees were asked to give any additional information or comments that provided insight to the phenomenon being studied.

Completion of the interview included clarifying what had been stated and then summarized participants' comments. At the end of the session, the interviewees were informed the session had concluded and asked for any comments while the recorder was off. Appreciation for their participation in the study was stated.

Establishing Reliability

Reliability has been described as the consistency of results if the same phenomenon was repeatedly studied (Merriam, 1998). The purpose was to gather data about the phenomenon being studied so that a rich description and explanation was written from the perspective of those experiencing the phenomenon. Credibility was established using triangulation and member checking.

The triangulation process used cross-validation of data to support findings and eliminate biases of researcher (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). Triangulation for this study included information gathered from participants, input from other stakeholders (such as administrators), RTI guidelines, and artifacts that provided support for data points and referrals to special education.

Member checking was used to guarantee credibility. This method allowed the data and interpretations to be taken back to participants for confirmation of accuracy and plausibility. Plausibility was determined in the substance of which the researcher reported and the rigor of the data analyzed. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated this method provides

participants the opportunity to include additional information as the transcripts and analysis of interviews are provided for verification. Member checking occurred throughout the data gathering process as the interviewees were provided access to written documentation or verbal clarification during and after the interview process.

Data Analysis

Merriam (1998) defined data analysis as a complex process involving inductive and deductive reasoning, as the researcher moves back and forth from concrete to abstract data. The analysis for this study began with the gathering of information through interviews and field notes. The information was organized into a descriptive account of the phenomenon. Categories were used that reflected the purpose of the study. The constant comparison method was used as the process of comparing data within and across the categories. The comparison and revision of categories were repeated and new data were added until categories were saturated and themes emerged (Creswell, 1998).

A coding scheme was used to manage data. Initially, a simple coding scheme based on repeated themes illustrated by incidents, quotes, or artifacts was used. As the coding for each theme becomes multilevel, a more complex coding scheme was used (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). QSR Non numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theory-building (NUD.IST) software or a comparable program was considered for use in managing, exploring, and analyzing data. Information from all sources was

used in generating the final report of research findings. All data collected were securely filed.

Summary

The research design, participants, instrumentation, establishing reliability, and data analysis were explained. Research questions and their purposes were rationalized. The study's design used qualitative procedures to evaluate teachers' perceptions of effectiveness of meeting at-risk students' needs using RTI Framework. Each participant was interviewed. Data were gathered from field notes taken during the interview, audio-taping of the interview, observing teachers' reactions to questions, and transcriptions of the interviews. Data from the interviews were analyzed to provide a thick, rich description for this qualitative study.

Overview of Study

Chapter 4 details the results. Its contents consist of introduction of participants, the data analysis, participants' responses to each of the six research questions, details related to emerged themes, and a summary.

Chapter 5 encompasses a discussion on the findings through a summary, conclusions, findings, recommendations for implementing RTI, and recommendations for further study and research.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to create a foundation of knowledge through exploratory case study interviews to identify teachers' perceptions of implementing RTI in meeting at-risk students' needs in grades kindergarten through second. The basis for this study related to IDEA recently requiring RTI implementation in the regular education classroom as result of changes in special education laws (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007). Participants in perceptual research according to Bulterman-Bos (2008) were considered as experts and their action developed knowledge that was personal but about reality. There was an assumption that the important reality was what people perceive it to be (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). The intent and design of the study was to yield information that would benefit other educators implementing RTI.

Introduction of Participants

Teacher A had an Educational Specialist degree and 28 years experience in elementary education. The first 10 years were in special education when services were offered through pull-out classes. The last 18 years were in the general education classroom, currently teaching second grade. Teacher A's memorable moments described observing how special education "has totally changed in this school." Over the past 5 years all children were allowed the opportunity to participate in inclusion

settings. Instead of the idea being equal but separate, it was now everyone working together to meet needs of "not only our special education kids but our at-risk students."

Teacher B had an Educational Specialist Degree and 10 years teaching experience in elementary education. The past 9 years Teacher B was in the general education classroom, currently the Title 1 RTI Teacher. Memorable moments related to a child needing interventions. "I see a struggling student who may need extra support in reading, writing or math. RTI helped students receive the extra instruction needed and kept them from slipping through the cracks."

Teacher C had a Bachelor's Degree to teach high school social studies. Due to inability to coach football and lack of job opportunities, no teaching experience at the high school level was attained. After several years of work in a preschool setting, Teacher C went back to college to add elementary endorsement and licensure. Eight years of teaching experience in elementary education began with 10 years of substitute teaching experience. Seven of the 8 years were in kindergarten, which she was currently teaching. Teacher C's memorable moments were working with students in small group. "Doing a lot of small group with the at-risk kids; whether it's myself or my assistant doing it, even if it's just an extra half hour of work with them. I mean it is simple stuff, either playing games or something, where it's a learning experience."

Teacher D had a Master's Degree in Education and 10 years of teaching experience in elementary education. For the past 2 years Teacher D had been in the position of Reading Specialist for kindergarten, first grade, and second grade students. Memorable moments related to student's change in attitude from "I can't do that to yes I can. Just knowing that our efforts have made an impact on the students is always amazing and motivating for teachers and students."

Teacher G had a Doctoral Degree in Education and 32 years of teaching experience. Earlier teaching experience was with elementary hearing impaired students. Current experience was with first grade general education students. The continuing challenge of meeting the needs of all students was present as there was always at least one at-risk student in the class. Memorable moments from Teacher G related to making a difference with at-risk students through use of multi-leveled strategies, pedagogical theories, and practical applications. Teacher G gave an example of a memorable moment. "One student improved her reading grade from a U to a C in a 6-week period when I began using some of the strategies based on foundational knowledge I had acquired in college."

Teacher H had a Bachelor's Degree in Education with 3 years experience and was working on her Master's Degree. Teaching experience included a kindergarten-first grade combination classroom with a wide range of abilities among the students. Current teaching assignment

was a kindergarten classroom. Memorable moments related to the difficulty of meeting all students' needs without the support of RTI. "I would tutor after school to help these students."

Teacher J had an Educational Specialist Degree and 30 plus years teaching experience in the elementary general education classroom. Teacher J was currently teaching second grade. The statement was made that there "always have been and will be at-risk students." Teacher J's memorable moments related to using a variety of teaching strategies, small groups, and tutoring after school to meet the students' needs. The success ranged from dramatic to minimal. Teacher J stated, "Experience in working with these students has at times been very rewarding for me. More, often it has been frustrating leaving me feeling that I didn't do quite enough."

Teacher K had an Educational Specialist Degree and 16 years experience in elementary education. Teacher K was currently teaching kindergarten students. Memorable moments were described as students required more individual help and parents were provided more support. Teacher K stated, "I am usually the first teacher to deal with at-risk children. I want to make their first year, even though it may be hard on them, to be an enjoyable one."

Teacher L had a Doctoral Degree in Education and 31 years teaching experience in general education. Twelve of those years Teacher L taught a transition first grade class. Students were either

environmentally disadvantaged or language impaired but experienced

success in academic endeavors. Memorable moments related to this class

becoming a "dumping ground." Teacher L described the class as one "for

children with special needs…not children with a chance to catch up."

Data Analysis

Data were gathered describing teachers' perceptions of RTI related

to professional development activities, administrative support, criteria

requirements, and benefits. The data for this study were gathered from

open-ended interviews with 9 regular education teachers. The

heterogeneous purposeful sampling (Sadker et al., 2007) consisted of

kindergarten teachers, 1st grade teachers, or 2nd grade teachers currently

teaching and implementing RTI in 6 elementary schools in 4 school

districts in East Tennessee. The participants' willingness to share

information based on their perception and reality demonstrated an evident

desire to contribute reliable and constructive information. However, it was

noted the data collected were considered representative of participants'

perception related only to this study.

The interview transcriptions were coded and categorized. Initially

the categories addressed successes, perceptions of special education,

professional development activities, and intervention programs. The data

were then subcategorized so that more meaningful information was

achieved. Six themes emerged from this analysis, allowing the data be

presented in a more significant way: (a) ability-based small groups met at-risk students' needs; (b) professional development activities prepared teachers; (c) administrators' roles were perceived supportive of RTI; (d) impact on use or effectiveness by teachers' perceptions; (e) students met criteria for RTI based on benchmark testing; and (f) RTI significantly impacted students' academic growth.

Research Question 1

What are teachers' perceptions of implementing Response-to-Intervention in meeting the needs of at-risk students in kindergarten through second grade?

RTI was defined as the practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student needs. In this process student's progress was monitored frequently, and data were gathered for use in decision-making with reference to changes in instruction or goals (Elliot, 2008). An emerged theme from the data analysis was teachers' perceived at-risk students' needs were met using RTI through ability-based small group instruction, which used data from benchmark testing and teacher input. Five of the 9 teachers, who represented 3 school districts, described RTI as a very structured framework with interventions matched to student needs. Each participant stated data were collected from weekly and quarterly benchmark testing and used in the decision-making process to determine students' progress and gains. Four of the 5 teachers expressed

RTI as a structured framework necessary for assuring at-risk students' academic growth. One participant believed RTI, if implemented differently, could benefit students to a greater extent. The other four teachers met students' needs within their classrooms without a structured RTI framework.

Teacher A had implemented RTI for the past 3 years and was enthusiastic to share about RTI. She shared the school had "seen an increase in language arts and reading test scores since we implemented RTI with our lower levels." Students received instruction in ability-level small groups using formative assessment results and teacher input. The lowest five students were pulled out of the classroom for 30 minutes per day. Teacher A described the RTI pull-out classroom setting as:

> Students working on standards that they didn't test out of… the same standards that we are teaching that week... the same vocabulary and the same spelling…a smaller classroom…a kidney shaped table, the SmartBoard in the middle, everybody going…using a lot of manipulatives, games, word families, and a lot of things that in whole group they would get lost in doing.

She detailed the general education classroom implementation of RTI included students being developmentally grouped. Teachers changed groups on a scheduled basis (i.e. every 3 weeks). Collaboration among the teachers occurred so that students' progress could be followed. She smiled and stated, "I like to know how my kids are doing." The development groups addressed the low to high groups. All students received interventions regardless of their academic levels.

Teacher B stated with much emphasis, "I think RTI is needed! RTI provides the skills that students are lacking and gives extra support to students who may not receive it at home." The "struggling student" needed extra support in core academics in the classroom. Students were grouped based on their ability level using a universal screen assessment. RTI support was given based on assessment results. These students were given interventions within the appropriate tier. Teacher B described the "main goal" of implementing RTI as having "helped students receive the extra instruction needed … and kept them from slipping through the cracks."

All children's needs were addressed through interventions regardless of ability level, high, or low. Teacher D used the analogy of every child having an individual reading program. She stated very confidently, "You know where this group of students skills are and you plan to meet those needs." The grouping or students in the Tiers changed throughout the year based on which group or Tier could best meet the students' need. The intervention groups were scheduled school-wide and held within classrooms. The reading specialist provided research-based programs based on strengths and challenges of each group. With a smile and zest for implementing RTI, she stated:

> We try to look at everything before we start moving through the tiers and determine what it is, before we try to fix it, if we can. We may not hit everything, but we watch it pretty close.

As the reading specialist, she provided suggestions, advice, or models for teachers on how to do interventions if the need surfaced.

In kindergarten scheduling of intervention groups was done by the reading specialist according to Teacher H. Students were grouped according to ability based on their benchmark testing results. She stated a concern of RTI was, "not all students meet with their homeroom teachers…classroom teacher sees the reports of student's progress but not the progress of students in group." The interventions for kindergarten were specific programs. Teacher H voiced a concern of students who were progressing. Because the same activity was used continuously, there was a fear of students becoming bored. Even though she stated "groups were flexible, students moved in and out", a suggestion of more movement within the Tiers and use of varied materials was given. This provided students an opportunity to progress at a faster rate.

Teacher C was adamant that "small groups" were the best way to meet at-risk students' needs. However, she had concerns of how students were placed into RTI groups. Students were tested with AIMSweb 3 times a year, August or September, January, and May. She stated, with frustration in her voice, a problem with RTI and intervention grouping as being,

> If they don't hit a certain…I think the first intervention in August, they have to name at least three letters. If they can't do that, then they are put into intervention. Reading intervention right then…from January when they test the children again…they go into the reading intervention right in the middle of the intervention…If you're right here in January and they can't name those letters, then that group

should be working with somebody from the beginning of the intervention program not the middle of it. Just love it and if you're coming in because you can't identify letters why are you, the reading program, starts with them naming how many word skills, not how many word in the sentence. I'm thinking (*laughs*) they need phonemic awareness before you start counting words in a sentence.

Frustration was evident as she pulled the AIMSweb test sheet out for the researcher to review. Although students were ability-grouped based on their AIMSweb test results, there was no movement in or out of Tiers until the next benchmark testing. Teacher input regarding student ability was not a consideration for students receiving RTI, only benchmark testing. Teacher C expressed RTI was a long process. In her words, "How many more hurdles do we have to jump, because you are not being fair to the child?"

Teacher L stated, "I have been using 'RTI' for at least 25 years…long before it was called RTI." She stated RTI was implemented in the classroom through constant evaluation of students using teacher observations in a variety of learning situations. Students were determined at-risk in her classroom based on "frequent progress measurement and increasingly intensive research-based instructional interventions." The observations of students were documented, which aided in a more accurate assessment of students' needs.

"I can't recall a year of teaching without at least 1 at-risk student in my classroom", stated Teacher G. Prevention of academic failure through early intervention was expressed as being the purpose for implementing

the three Tiers of RTI. According to Teacher G all interventions were implemented in the classroom based on pre- and postassessments. No one specific strategy was used. She stated, "The strategies I use differ from child to child, depending on their needs, but I attempt to teach and engage children in ways that accompany their learning styles."

In Teacher K's kindergarten class identifying at-risk students was based on falling behind in academics. "If a child is struggling with letters, numbers, or any or our skills, I pull them aside… to practice or aid in class work," stated Teacher K. It was her perception that RTI implementation was done in the classroom by the teacher. Through observations the students' weaknesses were noted and different approaches used.

All the participants had an understanding of RTI and used it to meet at-risk students' needs. The five teachers who used the structured RTI framework stated at-risk students' needs were best met through ability-level small groups. Based on formative assessments given frequently throughout the year individual students' needs were met. The four teachers who implemented RTI without a structured framework stated at-risk students' needs were met in the classroom using a variety of strategies and approaches. Students' individual needs were determined through teacher observations, frequent progress measurement, and pre- and postassessments.

What are teachers' perceptions of professional development activities provided to prepare them to implement RTI? What additional professional development activities could be suggested to more effectively prepare teachers to implement RTI?

Federal government initiatives were typically conveyed to teachers as specific practices and strategies that must be implemented. These initiatives created many questions and concerns for educators. Professional development activities were developed to provide answers (Tully et al., 2008). RTI was designed to evolve in school improvement, lead to buy-in, and bring answers to the staff (Tully et al., 2008). Students' instructional needs were assessed using resources available to educators and taught accordingly. It was important for educators to have an understanding and knowledge of RTI components for accurate documentation of students' progress (Harry & Klingner, 2007). Successful implementation of RTI occurred when everyone worked cooperatively to increase students' academic deficits (Richards et al., 2007).

Teacher A perceived RTI created collaboration and collegiality among grade levels. In January prior to implementing RTI in August of 2007 the school formed an RTI committee consisting of one teacher per grade level. The principal required staff to review a notebook "from the State Department containing RTI regulations." These teachers were representatives and received RTI training at central office. The

representatives took the information from the training back to individual schools and met with the Title 1 Coordinator for training specifically related to the individual school. Based on this training Teacher A shared,

> We had to go back into our area and each teacher leader taught each particular grade level RTI… We discussed how RTI was going to be implemented the August before it was actually implemented in our school. That was just the training. So the first year, I guess that was three years ago, it took us those first years to really do it well, I think. Each year, I think, we have gotten a little bit better as far as implementation goes.

An RTI Assessment notebook per grade level was the result of a current professional development activity. Developing the notebook involved significant collaboration and collegiality involvement. The notebook included all assessments administered throughout the year along with a written plan of how data were analyzed and used.

Teacher D described very similar professional activities specific to RTI and Tier-level instruction. During the summer months, "county-wide RTI training was focused to specific personnel." Participants included principals, reading specialists, literacy coaches, and special education personnel. Their goal was to build the program and become resources when the need arose for question and answer sessions. At individual schools reading specialists planned professional development activities. These activities included an explanation of RTI from a psychologist. RTI was described to include Tier-level instruction so all children, not just the at-risk students, received reading interventions. Educators shared

materials to assist with interventions. She stated professional

development activities were adequate for her, but

> I don't know if every teacher in the system understands specifically
> the guidelines…I don't know if our teachers would be able to tell
> you as much detail, as possibly I would, but I am a resource for
> them to come to, if they have questions.

An air of confusion about RTI was present in the school. She designed a

question and answer professional development activity asking central

office RTI resource personnel to be presenters. This activity alleviated

confusion within the school.

Teacher K also experienced confusion about RTI. She attended a

county-wide professional development activity. She left the activity feeling

confused and disagreeing with some of the information presented.

Consultation with resource personnel in her school building helped to

clarify her confusion and understanding of RTI. She perceived this

professional development activity created confusion instead of knowledge

and understanding. She stated, "We need to be consistent in the ways

that each school understands RTI."

Teacher H, Teacher B, Teacher C, and Teacher J concurred

professional development activities were necessary at the introductory

stage of RTI implementation. Teacher H inferred availability to

professional development activities was limited. She only recalled one

activity, which was during a faculty meeting. Other opportunities included

discussions with grade level colleagues and the RTI Literacy Coach when

concerns arose. Teacher C recalled being trained "when we got the new

reading series...from the (textbook) company." She tried to recall other professional development activities, even when provided a probe none were recalled. Teacher J described the most helpful professional development activities were designed to support awareness of how to get the best help possible for a student and specific strategies to use. The motivator was the process and how to implement RTI effectively.

Intrigued with RTI Teacher L and Teacher G attended professional development activities beyond the local level. Teacher L stated, "Attending national and international reading and math conferences have been the most informative for me." She also indicated teachers attend workshops and conventions with a hope of learning strategies for "affording their students the most effective way to learn the required material." Although Teacher G attended conferences at the state and international level, she stated, "My understandings concerning RTI have not come through professional development opportunities but through discussions with supervisors, college professors, persons working for the Tennessee Department of Education, and my own research."

All nine participants' perception was that ongoing professional development activities were necessary to implement RTI effectively. RTI is open to interpretation and created questions. To lesson confusion and provide consistency all schools had the same guidelines and understanding for implementing the Tiers of RTI in 3 school systems. Teacher C summarized RTI professional development activities helpful for

new teachers and among grade levels especially when collegiality was not apparent.

Research Question 3

What are teachers' perceptions of administrators' role in implementing RTI?

Vaughn stated, "RTI is an opportunity, not a federal mandate" (as cited in Hall, 2008, p. 26). It was local school district personnel who need to identify, learn, and implement a wide-variety of interventions (Carney & Stiefel, 2008). Success of RTI was identified as the extent to which the core curriculum increased the likelihood of meeting goals defined under NCLB. Administrators were proactive in positioning the initiative as a joint effort between all staff, general educators and special education educators (Kovaleski, 2007).

Teacher A shared their school was "always changing and we're always open to suggestions." Throughout the interview, there were inferences to the administrator allowing autonomy within grade levels to implement programs that were necessary for students to succeed. She described the building level administrator as willing to change.

> It's not working, let's see professional learning clubs. She'll say what's working, what's not working. Everything you do you have to meet with her and have a proposal, which is good…I mean it's a lot of work but it's great.

However, teachers were held accountable each school year by presenting their program plans in written format for review by the administrator. This

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was described as making their administrator a good leader. Teacher A summarized support from administration, "She is wonderful."

Participation in the problem-solving process was perceived as support from administration by Teacher J. As part of this process providing resources to meet students' needs was perceived as support. These resources, as stated by Teacher J, "enhance the learning of these (at-risk) students as well as others."

Through voice tone and a facial expression Teacher C expressed with delight strong support from not only building level administrator but from the Director of Schools. Educators in this school had recently met with the Director of Schools to discuss concerns. RTI and student placement were topics of concern discussed. She stated, "His feeling is it shouldn't be just this" (points to AIMSWeb benchmark testing form). In reference to support from building level administration, with admiration, respect, and enthusiasm she stated, "Oh yes, our principal, if there is a problem you go speak to him, it's not like his office door is shut, very supportive administrative."

An organized, efficient, and amazing administrator was Teacher D's perception of the support received at the building level. She stated,

> The fact, that she could take what we have at our school, with all the needs, the schedules, number of classrooms, teachers, and students and come up with a plan for every child in the school to get reading intervention on their level for 45 minutes three times a week AND an additional 30 minutes for those that are in Tier 3 on top of those Tier 1 and 2 times. I just think that's an amazing feat.

There was no hesitation when answering this question as she shared administration understood the importance of implementing RTI, which allowed the staff to see the effect of it. Evidence was provided through the high priority given to personnel, resources, and training. Teacher D summarized the support of administration by stating, "She does whatever it takes for our teachers and our kids at our school to succeed."

Six of the nine participants enthusiastically stated strong administration support for RTI initiative and implementation. Three participants did not give a response to this question. Their answers related to how RTI was implemented at their schools indicating administrative support. The six interviewees' responses varied regarding administration support. Their responses indicated support was evident when allowance was given to make changes, when a school-wide schedule for implementation was provided, when administrator participated in the problem-solving process, or when resources to meet students' needs were supplied.

Research Question 4

How does the classroom teacher's perception of RTI impact the use of and effectiveness of RTI in the classrooms?

Students come to school with varying ability levels, some at-risk for learning and others above the expected requirements. This required the teacher to have an in-depth understanding of how to meet each one's

needs (Carney & Stiefel, 2008). Effective implementation of RTI ensured all students have equitable access to the core curriculum. It compelled educators to evaluate their instruction practices and respond to needs of all students (Elliot, 2008). The basic core principle was that all students can learn. According to Elliot (2008) it was important to believe one can effectively teach all children

Teacher A was an active contributor to implementing RTI in her school. She served on various committees and was trained for several months prior to the school implementing RTI. She was a grade level teacher leader for training colleagues and developing a system of how to implement effectively. She discussed it with much ease and demonstrated an understanding with knowledge of interventions to meet all students' needs. The word "standards" was repeated several times in our interview. She elaborated by stating, "We just teach standards. That is all we do, just standards, standards, standards." Teacher A also shared the Literacy Coach worked with students on the same standards that were addressed in the classroom. Her tone indicated and the statement confirmed that she supported RTI, which impacted how it was implemented and its effectiveness in the classroom. She stated,

> See, it's the small classroom size…just in smaller dose…everybody going and… a lot of manipulative and games… and a lot of things that in whole group they (students) would get lost in doing that. It took us those first years to really do it well, I think. Each year I think we have gotten a little bit better as far as implementation goes.

There was excitement in her voice as she shared the county had seen gains in test scores since implementing RTI, especially with the lower levels.

Discussion of least restrictive environment and inclusion resulted in Teacher A's statement, "I feel like **everybody** is in least restrictive environment right now with the inclusion of every child." There was hesitation from the staff initially because of a lack of understanding. Through administration's foresight to provide professional development activities, inclusion was successfully implemented. Teacher A expressed, "I feel for the **student** being singled out it is better. It has helped ADHD kids stay focused and on task by pulling them in a small group of two or three within the classroom." However, RTI was not associated with special education throughout this interview even when Tier-level instruction was discussed.

The somewhat negative perception of interventions used with formal RTI did not impact the use of or effectiveness of RTI in Teacher C's classroom. She stated "working with at-risk kids in small group whether myself or my assistant" was meeting the needs of all students. She was adamant that one source of information should not be the sole determining factor for receiving RTI formally. Collaboration among kindergarten colleagues occurred so that interventions were provided to teacher identified at-risk students. These students were not qualified for interventions based on benchmark testing but were struggling with

acquisition of skills. A daily schedule allowed teacher assistants to work with those students on deficit areas such as letter recognition.

Inclusion was discussed to determine if RTI was associated with special education. This conversation inferred RTI was linked to special education. Teacher C stated special education students "were not in a regular education classroom" when she started teaching. Then mainstreaming and inclusion "started bringing them back." For most of the students, she believed this was fine and worked well. She also shared there were "times when too many special needs students were in a regular education classroom." When this happened, Teacher C stated, "You are being unfair to both children, to special needs kids and regular education kids." An example of a child placed into a special needs class took a school year because interventions were implemented and progress documented until adequate documentation showed a lack of progress. This was a frustration to Teacher C. In her words,

> I mean it was **no** we have to do this, **no** we have to do that. It was taking away from him. It was taking away from the 17 others I had. How many more hurdles do we have to jump, because you are not being fair to the child?

As Reading Specialist Teacher D worked with all the teachers to ensure RTI was formally implemented within the classroom. In this role students were provided small-group instruction at their ability level in Teacher D's classroom. When a need developed in the general education classroom, small-groups were dispersed and the need was addressed. She perceived RTI was "not just for the at-risk kids, but for everyone. We

want reading groups for everyone." Based on this, RTI was used and effective in the classrooms because all teachers had a resource person to address questions or concerns.

Teacher D very confidently stated, "I am not special education", when asked about association of RTI and special education. However, she shared that,

> In the past, children would struggle so **predominately** and we would test them. They would be performing at their achievement level or **higher** in some cases, but really needed the extra help and could not get it. They were kind of isolated and alone because they were going on to higher grades. You knew the frustrations ahead of them and you knew there was no help.

RTI was associated with special education in this interview. At-risk students' needs were addressed through interventions, specific programs, or teacher strategies until progress was documented in a 24 to 28 week process. If at-risk students' gains were not significant, guidelines had been followed, and all interventions possible were used, the student was referred for assessment. Teacher D stated, "The process of getting in the evaluation stage is more authentic. The process does take longer to get them there, but it gives more time to address their needs."

The other participants implemented RTI within their classrooms and perceived it as required to meet students' needs. Teacher K's and Teacher J's input addressed the increase of documentation and interventions required to show adequate progress. Teacher J stated, "Teachers might not have tried to get special help for at-risk students now feel that they MUST. It is harder for these children to slip through cracks,"

Teacher L and Teacher G very specifically addressed the changes in special education law. Teacher G linked RTI with the change in IDEA that the discrepancy formula was no longer the required component. Teacher L addressed education of special needs students in the regular education setting:

> Fragile children with mental and-or physical abilities should not be in a classroom with children who are able to learn. It is never right to jeopardize the learning of nineteen students in order to afford a very handicapped child an opportunity to have time with other children. This is fair to neither.

Teacher H was positive about inclusion of special needs students. She stated, "This is a good thing, as long as these students' needs are being met."

All participants' perception of RTI was positive and necessary to meet students' needs. The participants willingly shared that all students were provided interventions and academic needs were addressed in the classroom with RTI regardless of their academic ability level. Three of the participants were in a school system using Literacy Coaches or Reading Specialists to assist with RTI implementation, which was perceived necessary for RTI success.

Probes were used to inquire if teachers perceived RTI a special education initiative. There was an initial association of RTI to special education because of the language in IDEA (2004). The analysis of data did not support this idea. Each interviewee had knowledge of PL 94-142 and the reauthorizations, especially inclusion. Two teachers associated

RTI with special education and seven teachers associated RTI with Title 1 programs.

Research Question 5

According to teachers' perceptions of students in their classrooms, how are students determined to be at-risk and meet criteria for RTI?

Finding help for the student through special education was contrasted by RTI. The help was given as assessments were administered and interventions delivered, which created more responsibility for the general education staff (Fuchs & Mellard, 2007). The need was to start with the student not the subject. When students' interests were the beginning point, learning environments were created that considers how they best learn. When students' individuality is considered, the outcomes achieved are far greater than hoped (Castleman & Littky, 2007).

Five of the interviewees' perceived students met criteria for RTI based on benchmark testing. Every child was assessed three times per year using either DIBELS or AIMSWeb. Four of the interviewees perceived students met criteria for RTI based on results from formative assessments or teacher input.

Teacher A stated, "DIBELS is our main indicator but there are other things we can use. There are three different assessments and teacher input is considered when determining if students meet criteria for RTI." Teacher D concurred with this statement indicating that students' needs

were the priority and several sources of information were used to determine interventions needed because every child received interventions. It was important to review students' accomplishment level for grade level expectations and to have teacher input. Teacher B also identified DIBELS as the universal screen for determining at-risk or strategic students. At-risk students were provided RTI and were benchmarked three times before interventions were stopped. Teacher H identified universal screening focused on targeted skills was used to identify at-risk students.

The four teachers who did not implement RTI formally depended upon teacher observation, progress measurement, falling behind in academics, Discovery Learning Think Link tests, Yopp and Yopp phoneme segmentation test, running records, and basal reader story tests. Teacher J stated, "I know first there is a need through teacher observation. Then needed documentation is gathered using fluency checks and comprehension checks, both verbal and written."

There was one participant whose perception was negative related to how students met criteria for RTI. Students were placed in intervention groups based solely on the AIMSWeb results. She shared numerous examples of students who were achieving at grade level based on classroom checklist but were in the intervention groups. Other students who struggled immensely were not receiving RTI because they successfully passed the benchmark testing. An example was,

If you know you have a kid that just bombed this (AIMSWeb test). You are going wait a minute; this child does know his letters. One little boy was put into intervention in January. He knew all his letters and sounds. He could decode and read. Why are you putting him in, because he didn't name enough letters in a minute? You have got to have more than this (points to AIMSWeb test). The teacher needs to have some input into it.

She firmly believed RTI and small groups met at-risk students' needs but believed one test was not the "end all" for deciding who receives RTI interventions.

Five of the interviewees perceived students at-risk and met criteria for RTI based on benchmark testing, DIBELS or AIMSWeb. The testing was administered three times per year. This information along with teacher input and other documentation about students' progress was considered according to four of the nine interviewees. Four of the interviewees perceived students at-risk and met criteria for RTI based on teacher observation, progress measurement, and documentation. Eight participants positively responded to the process used for determining students met criteria for RTI. One participant negatively responded to only benchmark testing results used in determining students met criteria for RTI.

Research Question 6

What are teachers' perceptions about benefits or impact of RTI on academic growth of at-risk students?

An educator's responsibility involved identifying curricular, instructional, and environmental conditions that contributed to learning (Elliot, 2008). The focus was placed on how to learn and the value of learning not on manipulating students to learn. As students took ownership of learning, mistakes were made, frustration was evident, risks were taken, and ultimately learning became a very rewarding activity as the strategies created excitement with learning (Jackson, 2009).

Teacher A documented increased gains of students scoring in lower quartiles on standardized testing in a research project. Teacher A described setting goals with the students was a benefit of RTI:

> We show our little kids because they can see that graph. If they don't take the reader home, we will say your line stays the same and we want your line to be up here. They understand that. It has the visual picture. If they have been reading and the line is moving up, we show and tell them that too. They are excited about moving up and color coding to make it more visual for them.

An increase in students' grade equivalent scores was another benefit of RTI. Teacher A stated appreciatively that students' academic progress was documented frequently by the Title 1 Reading Teacher. Benchmark testing results charted weekly or biweekly validated students' growth progress. The charts provided the teacher necessary information, encouraged the students, and narrowed the achievement gap closer to grade level in reading skills. Teacher B perceived this as the hardest. Students received interventions in Tiers 1, 2, or 3 for a specified period of weeks and time per day. The child was placed in a Tier based on the progress documented. She stated,

I personally have found this to be the hardest. I think this is an area that does need to be improved on, because I may see little Joe making progress. Yet, how much is enough or not enough.

A child in second grade reading below grade level but progressing .5 or even 1.0 in his reading level was an example. The question was whether continue intensive interventions or refer for special education assessment. No answers were in the county or state guidelines. The solution came from the problem-solving team based on student's needs.

Teacher C perceived formal RTI implementation was not of great benefit or impact on students' academic growth. However, she agreed with the concept and implemented RTI with her colleagues in the kindergarten grade level. Students placed in formal RTI Tiers based on one benchmark test were described as a problem. There was no movement in or out of Tiers when goals were reached until the next benchmark test was administered. She gave an example of one boy who received interventions all year and did not know his colors. She expressed much concern of standards and skills taught out of sequence in the intervention groups. Benchmark testing identified letters, but this was not targeted, to her understanding, in the intervention Tiers. However, progress monitoring was done weekly, but students stayed in the Tier until the next benchmark testing regardless if goal was met.

Teacher D perception of RTI was beneficial and impacted at-risk students' academic growth. Her description of Tiers 2 and 3 along with

progress monitoring was very detailed in how students' academic growth

was accomplished. She shared:

> Our numbers for Tiers 2 and 3 are actually quite high. We do not put everyone in, just because you test at-risk does not mean you are Tier 3. If you have gone through the timeframe, then you are in Tier 3. However, once we move them into a Tier, we keep them in place. Even though they are continuing on a slope and showing gains and move into Tier 3, we are not moving them back. Once we identify students as need for Tier 2, even at any point in that twelve week span, especially at the end, then we move them to Tier 3. They get even more time on task, small group, and usually progress more. This may not be at the rate we would like to see them move but enough that's considered appropriate gain; where they need to be.

Students were in Tier 3 for 10 to 12 weeks and adequate progress was

not evident before a referral for special education assessment was made.

Several factors were considered in this decision: number of data points,

teacher's input, absences, illnesses, and family issues. Other benefits of

RTI that impacted students' academic growth were goal setting,

information for parents, and consistent data. These factors allowed the

student to make significant gains and be successful in the appropriate

grade level. As Teacher B stated, "They may not be the straight 'A'

student but they are not the student that says I cannot do this."

Teacher L and Teacher G implemented RTI informally in their

classroom. They perceived it to benefit the students when transfer of

learning occurred through the assessments given. Teacher L related RTI

to: "Teaching the concepts again using different strategies, peer tutoring,

small group discussions or discovery, and one-on-one instruction, if

students' success is not as I would like." Teacher G determined students'

success based on pre- and postassessments, which showed a "marked improvement." She stated, "The strategies I use differ from child to child depending on his needs, but I attempt to teach and engage children in ways that accompany their learning styles."

Teacher J and Teacher K also implemented RTI informally in their classroom. They perceived RTI beneficial and impacted students' academic growth. Progress was based on teacher observation or "marked improvement in their academic performance." Both teachers discussed the need for using a variety of strategies to meet at-risk students' needs. These included personnel resources in the building, changes in the interventions, and involving parents to help at home.

All nine participants perceived RTI beneficial and impacted at-risk students' academic growth whether it was formally or informally implemented. All nine interviewees perceived the small groups used in RTI of great benefit. The small groups created opportunities for students to use hands-on materials, use of varied interventions, and deficit areas addressed on an individual basis. Although students' academic growth was not to grade level expectations, RTI was beneficial in closing the achievement gap.

Themes Emerged from Data Analysis

Six themes emerged from the data analysis and allowed a more significant presentation. The themes were: (a) ability-based small groups

met at-risk students' needs; (b) professional development activities prepared teachers; (c) administrators' roles were perceived supportive of RTI; (d) impact on use or effectiveness by teachers' perceptions; (e) students met criteria for RTI based on benchmark testing; and (f) RTI significantly impacted students' academic growth.

Ability-Based Small Groups Met At-Risk Students' Needs

A purpose of implementing RTI using the Tiers was to prevent academic failure through early intervention. RTI required the provision of high-quality instruction and interventions matched to students' needs. According to each participant interventions were determined using data from benchmark testing and teacher input. Five of the nine participants described RTI as a very structured framework that matched interventions to students' needs ensuring academic growth. The other four teachers met students' needs in the classrooms without a structured RTI framework.

The five participants that used RTI as a structured framework used developmental-level or ability-level groups to provide interventions. All students regardless of academic level received interventions in small groups based on results from formative assessments and teacher input. The implementation of RTI and instruction presented in small groups led to an increase in reading and language arts test scores in one school. The small-groups provided opportunities for intense Tier 1, 2, or 3 interventions based on students' needs and individual learning styles. The groups were

flexible and students moved in and out depending upon their progress. The use of small groups provided students an opportunity to progress at a faster rate.

All the participants had an understanding of RTI and used it to meet at-risk students' needs. The five teachers who used the structured RTI framework stated at-risk students' needs were best met through ability-level small groups. Based on formative assessments administered frequently throughout the year, individual students' needs were met. The four teachers who implemented RTI without a structured framework stated at-risk students' needs were met in the classroom using a variety of strategies and approaches. Students' individual needs were determined through teacher observations, frequent progress measurement, and-or pre- and postassessments using interventions matched to students' learning styles. As Teacher B stated, "the main goal" of implementing RTI was to "help students receive the extra instruction needed…and to have kept them from slipping through the cracks."

Professional Development Activities Prepared Teachers

The design of RTI evolved in school improvement, led to buy-in, and brought answers to the staff (Tully et al., 2008). The data analysis found all participants bought into RTI and attended professional development activities on how to implement RTI. The emerged theme was

professional development activities prepared teachers who were included in the initial training.

The professional development activities and RTI guidelines provided information to participants on how to implement and what interventions to use. Three of the five participants implementing RTI in a structured framework were provided professional development activities at the district level. These three participants became representatives and were responsible for training colleagues in their schools. Seven of the nine participants received only the training provided at the district or school level. Two of the seven recalled only being given information at staff meetings or when a new reading series was introduced and required implementation of RTI. Two of the nine participants were intrigued with RTI and attended professional development activities beyond the local level.

All nine participants' perception was that professional development activities were necessary to implement RTI effectively. Ongoing professional development was recommended because RTI was open to interpretation and questions resulted. Ongoing professional development activities lessened confusion and provided consistency for all schools that had the same guidelines and understood how to implement the Tiers of RTI. Teacher C summarized RTI Professional Development activities were helpful for new teachers and among grade levels especially when there was not collegiality.

Administrators' Role Was Perceived Supportive of RTI

Administrators were proactive in encouraging the initiative as a joint effort between all staff, general educators and special education teachers (Kovaleski, 2007). Vaughn stated, "RTI is an opportunity not a federal mandate" (as cited in Hall, 2008, p. 26). It was the local school district personnel who needed to identify, learn, and implement a wide-variety of interventions (Carney & Stiefel, 2008).

Six of the nine participants enthusiastically stated strong administration support for RTI initiative and implementation. Three participants' responses related to how RTI was implemented at their schools indicating administrative support. All nine participants perceived administrators took an active role in supporting RTI. The six interviewees' responses varied regarding administration support. Their responses indicated support was evident when allowance was given to make changes. Support was evident through the provision of a school-wide schedule for implementation. Administrator participation in the problem-solving process was perceived as evidence of support. Finally, teachers perceived administrators supportive when supplied resources met students' needs. Teacher D perceived a supportive administrator of a district or school level as one who did "whatever it took for our teachers and our kids ... to succeed."

Impact on Use or Effectiveness by Teachers' Perceptions

Effective implementation of RTI ensured all students equitable access to the core curriculum. RTI compelled educators to evaluate their instruction practices and respond to needs of all students (Elliot, 2008). The basic core principle of RTI was all students can learn and educators can effectively teach all children (Elliot, 2008).

All nine participants perceived RTI as a positive initiative necessary to meet individual students' needs. RTI was used and perceived effective when resources or personnel addressed questions or concerns. All participants used RTI in the general education classroom with strategies matched to students' needs, regardless of academic ability level. Three of the nine participants were in a school district using Literacy Coaches or Reading Specialists as a personnel resource for RTI. These three participants perceived this resource a necessity for successful RTI implementation. Teacher H summarized the perceptions best by stating, "This {RTI} is a good thing, as long as these students' needs are being met."

Students Met Criteria for RTI Based on Benchmark Testing

When students' interests were the beginning point, a program of study was created that considered how they best learn. When students' individuality was considered, the outcomes achieved were far greater than hoped (Castleman & Littky, 2007). RTI created more responsibility for the

general education teacher because assessments administered and interventions delivered provided students the extra assistance.

All participants concurred that students' needs were the priority and several sources of information were used to determine interventions to implement. Five participants perceived benchmark testing as the best method for gathering baseline data of students' abilities and to document progress. It was important to review students' progress based on grade level expectations.

Five of the nine participants' perceived students at-risk and meet criteria for RTI based on benchmark testing, DIBELS or AIMSWeb. The testing was administered three times per year. These results were used along with teacher input and other formative assessment to determine students' progress. Four of the participants perceived students at-risk and met criteria for RTI based on teacher observation, progress measurement, and documentation. Eight participants responded positively to the process used for determining if students meet criteria for RTI. One participant expressed strong feelings that more information should be used other than just benchmark testing. Teacher J implied that teacher observation was used first to determine if a child was at-risk and needed interventions. The benchmark testing and other documentation gathered confirmed the teacher's observation.

RTI Significantly Impacted Students' Academic Growth

RTI focused on teaching students how to learn and the value of learning not on manipulating them to learn (Jackson, 2009). As students took ownership of learning, mistakes were made, frustration was evident, risks were taken, and ultimately learning became a very rewarding activity (Jackson, 2009). One participant gave an example of a student who often responded with "I don't know" when asked something. The student did not have the skills or the self-confidence to try. After completing interventions through Tier 2, she confidently volunteered and responded "I know, I know."

One participant shared goal setting was a benefit of RTI that impacted students' academic growth. Using a line graph as a visual, students were able to understand what was needed to meet the goal. Two participants perceived RTI to impact student academic growth when transfer of learning occurred through the assessments given.

All nine participants perceived RTI beneficial and impacted at-risk students' academic growth whether formally or informally implemented. Every participant perceived the small groups as an aspect of RTI that impacted students' growth. The small groups created opportunities for students to use hands-on materials, a use of varied interventions, and deficit areas addressed on an individual basis. Although students' academic growth was not at grade level expectations, RTI was beneficial in closing the gap. Teacher B summarized the impact of RTI on students'

academic growth when at-risk students were described as not the straight 'A' student but as the student who says I can do this.

Summary

This chapter restated the purpose of the study and provided a brief description of the study's design. This study interviewed nine participants to create a foundation of knowledge by exploring teachers' perceptions of implementing RTI in the primary grades. Introduction of participants have included background information and validated the study was conducted with certified educators. A summary of the data collection and analysis procedure was included. Each research question was listed and analyzed. Based on the analysis six themes emerged. Each theme was described and supporting evidence from the study was integrated.

Chapter 5 includes discussion on the findings. It also includes a summary, conclusions, findings, recommendations for implementing RTI, and recommendations for further study and research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to create a foundation of knowledge through exploratory case study interviews to identify teachers' perceptions of implementing RTI in meeting at-risk students' needs in primary grades. The nine participants were certified kindergarten teachers, first grade teachers, and second grade students in four rural East Tennessee school districts. The participants' teaching experience ranged from 3 to 32 years.

Open-ended interview questions were used to focus the study. The individual interviews divulged a rich description of teachers' perceptions related to implementation of RTI and meeting at-risk students' needs. The interviews also addressed underlying issues with special education related to RTI and the training that was required to implement RTI effectively.

Summary

Research question #1 addressed teachers' perceptions in meeting the at-risk students' needs in kindergarten through second grade. All participants understood RTI and used it to meet at-risk students' needs. Five participants used RTI as a structured framework. These participants described at-risk students' needs were met using ability-level, small groups in a pull-out tiered-instruction program. Results from frequently administered formative assessments provided evidence of at-risk students' academic progress. Four participants implemented RTI

informally in the classroom using a variety of strategies and approaches, which included ability-level small groups. Evidence of students' academic progress was determined by teacher observations, frequent progress measurement, and-or pre- and postassessments.

Research question #2 addressed teachers' perceptions of professional development activities that prepared them to implement RTI. Probes encouraged suggestions for professional development activities that enhanced preparation and understanding of implementing RTI. Each participant perceived professional development activities satisfactorily trained them for effective RTI implementation. Ongoing professional development activities were perceived as necessary because RTI created questions and was open to interpretation. Participants perceived inconsistency in understanding guidelines for tiered-instruction creating confusion. RTI professional development activities were described as helpful for new teachers and noncollaborating grade levels.

Research question #3 addressed teachers' perceptions of administrators' roles in implementing RTI. Six of the nine participants enthusiastically stated strong administration support and an active role in the RTI initiative and implementation. Three participants responded indirectly to this question. Their responses related to RTI implementation at their schools, which indicated administrative support. Six participants' responses described administration's roles in a variety of ways. Administrative support was evident when changes to a program were

allowed, a school-wide intervention schedule was provided, resources were supplied to meet students' needs, and administration was an active participant in the problem-solving process.

Research question #4 addressed how the classroom teachers' perception of RTI impacted the use and effectiveness of RTI in the classroom. All participants perceived RTI implementation positively and was necessary to meet students' needs. The participants willingly shared that all students' needs were addressed in the classroom through interventions with RTI, regardless of their academic ability level. Three of the participants' school districts used Literacy Coaches or Reading Specialists for implementing RTI. This was perceived as necessary for RTI success.

Research question #5 addressed teachers' perceptions of how students in their classrooms met criteria for RTI and were determined at-risk. Five of the interviewees' perceived students at-risk and met criteria based on benchmark testing, DIBELS or AIMSWeb. The testing was administered three times per year. Four participants indicated benchmark testing results, teacher input, and other documentation about students' progress were considered. Four participants' perceived teacher observation, progress measurement, and documentation as criteria for RTI. Eight participants responded positively to the process and criteria used. One participant adamantly expressed that benchmark testing alone was insufficient. Valuable teacher information used in conjunction with

benchmark testing provided reliable information on students who required interventions.

Research question #6 addressed teachers' perceptions of benefits or impact of RTI on academic growth of at-risk students. All nine participants perceived RTI that was formally or informally implemented beneficial and impacted at-risk students' academic growth. Tiered-instruction and ability-level, small groups were perceived as benefits of RTI. Students' academic growth was perceived to be impacted because deficit areas were addressed individually using hands-on materials and a variety of interventions. All nine participants perceived RTI was closing the achievement gap, although students' academic growth was not at grade level expectations.

Conclusions

Teachers' perceived RTI implementation met at-risk students' needs in kindergarten through second grade. The five participants who expressed the strongest support of RTI were in school districts that implemented RTI formally with literacy coaches and reading specialists assisting with daily interventions. All nine participants perceived RTI professional development activities necessary and suggested ongoing activities. Participants enthusiastically responded that school administration was supportive and played an active role in assuring effective implementation of RTI. All nine participants used formative

assessment to determine if students were at-risk and needed RTI. Each participant perceived RTI to benefit or impact at-risk students' academic growth. All participants used RTI in the classroom whether formally or informally. As one participant said, "Now they are just bringing it back under some different name. It is like folks, stop jumping on the latest trend down the pike when the old stuff works really well."

Findings

Information gained from interviews created a foundation of knowledge identifying teachers' perceptions of implementing RTI in meeting primary grades' at-risk students' needs. Analysis of data indicated teachers' perceived RTI was implemented only in core subjects of reading and language arts. One interview had a negative tone regarding benchmark testing used to identify students for tiered-instruction. This was associated with placement in tiered-instruction linked only to students' benchmark testing, not an overall global picture of the child's ability.

Introduction of RTI in the education setting was based on changes to IDEIA (2004). Probes were used to determine if participants' perceived RTI a special education initiative. Data analysis did not support this idea. Each participant had knowledge of PL 94-142 and the reauthorizations, particularly inclusion. However, only two participants associated RTI with special education and seven participants associated RTI with Title 1 programs.

Although the interview questions did not specifically address interventions, participants always discussed these in relation to RTI. The most common intervention was ability-level based small groups. Other interventions addressed were use of manipulatives, guided reading, hands-on concrete materials, simple games, or scientific research-based programs.

The findings for this foundation of knowledge based on data analysis indicated teachers' perceived RTI was necessary in meeting at-risk student's needs. Participants perceived adequate professional development training was provided prior to implementing RTI and continued because interpretation differed. Teachers' perceived administration was supportive and actively involved by providing necessary resources. Literacy Coaches or reading specialists were perceived important and beneficial for successful implementation of the RTI framework. RTI impacted students' academic growth. Frequent progress monitoring verified students' progress whether slight or significant. The following quote summarized teachers' perception of using RTI to meet at-risk students' needs:

> Saying we believe all kids can learn is a pleasant affirmation, but it is only when teachers articulate exactly what each student is expected to know and be able to do that the "learning for all" mission becomes meaningful. (Dufour et al., 2010, p. 33)

Participants agreed that teachers were knowledgeable of students' academic abilities, used formative assessment data to address the needs, and taught grade level standards to all children.

The findings from this study may inform educators and administrators as they develop future professional development activities. RTI professional learning communities at the building or district level may be implemented using information from this study. Educators may find helpful information as they establish or adjust the RTI framework for meeting at-risk students' needs in the general education classroom.

Recommendations for Implementing RTI

Teachers who participated in this study made the following recommendations concerning RTI.

- Read and learn as much as possible about RTI prior to beginning the process.

- Attend all professional development activities.

- Collaborate with colleagues about interventions.

- Visit schools implementing RTI and encouraging collaboration between all staff.

- Take it slow, be flexible, ask questions, and document everything.

- Involve the parent.

- Provide instruction at ability-level of students.

- Collect students' work samples to use in the problem-solving process.

- Determine tiered-instruction using global information about the student, not on one assessment.

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- In primary grades use oral assessments along with written assessments.

- Have a contact person such as a reading specialist or Literacy

- Coach.

- Follow Reading Specialist suggestions or outlined plan of interventions.

- Chart students' progress related to interventions used in tiered-instruction.

- Reflect on anecdotal notes and collection of work samples.

- Try different strategies.

Recommendations for Future Study

The researcher made the following recommendations as suggestions for future study in implementing RTI:

- Investigate the effectiveness of RTI in meeting at-risk students' needs at the intermediate and middle school levels.

- Provide a personnel resource support person (i.e. Reading Specialists or Literacy Coaches) to assist with benchmark testing, progress monitoring, scheduling, and providing tiered-instruction. This resource person may also provide guidance, knowledgeable recommendations, and serve as a liaison between the school and the district's central office.

- Design specific RTI implementation guidelines that are flexible and can be accomplished consistently in school districts.

Recommendations for Future Research

The researcher recommended the following suggestions for future research implementing RTI:

- RTI has been implemented only in reading and language arts; an interesting investigation could be developing a knowledge base of RTI implementation in math.
- Professional development activities have focused on specialized teachers and school psychologists; an investigation of professional development activities' effectiveness and opportunities for general education teachers' participation to stay abreast of current research-based interventions used with implementing RTI could provide beneficial information.
- Investigating identification of students as learning disabled based solely on documented lack of progress through the RTI process and not the discrepancy formula in the primary and intermediate grades may provide data to support a preferred method.
- Investigating implementation and effectiveness of interventions used with transient student population could provide useful information for educators.

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Summary

This chapter included discussion on the findings, a summary of each research question, and conclusions. Recommendations from participants for implementing RTI and from the researcher for further study and research were also included. This qualitative study's findings and conclusions were considered representative of teachers' perceptions as it related only to the nine participants in this study.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Letter to Director of Schools

Ms. Tammy Valentine
1448 Kay View Drive
Sevierville, TN 37876

November 10, 2009

Dear Director of Schools,

I am currently a Doctoral student at ETSU and am beginning the research process of my Dissertation. Most of my educational career has been with special education, which is my passion. Therefore, I have chosen as a qualitative study to explore teachers' perceptions to implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) with students who are suspected to have a disability or more commonly referred to as at-risk students. Since RTI is a relatively new process and the state is in the early stages of implementation, I am asking your permission to collect data for this study of teachers' perceptions to implementing RTI in meeting the academic needs of at-risk students in Kindergarten through Second Grade in *the name of school district.*

Participants in this study are to be certified Kindergarten, First Grade, Second Grade, or Special Education Resource Teacher with knowledge and experience implementing RTI. Participation is on a - voluntary basis, no coercion will be used. Written consent will be sought from principals of each school and each participant. Participants will be

asked to participate in an audio taped interview and survey. The interview will be held in the school or at a location of their choice and time of their convenience. The survey can be completed at any time and returned to me via mail or e-mail.

Please find enclosed a copy of the letter that will be sent to principals of each school that implements RTI and informed consent form for participants. Additionally, I have included a copy of the research questions guide and survey to be used with participants.

I appreciate your time, consideration and prompt written response in granting permission for data to be collected from participants in <u>name of school district placed here</u>. Upon completion of the study, the final report will be available for you to review along with ETSU and ELPA studies dissertation committee.

Sincerely,

Ms. Tammy Valentine
Assistant Principal, Sevierville Primary School
ETSU Doctoral Student

Business Phone:
865-453-2824
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APPENDIX B

Letter to Principals

Ms. Tammy Valentine
1448 Kay View Drive
Sevierville, TN 37876

November 10, 2009

Dear Principal,

I am currently a Doctoral student at ETSU and am beginning the process of writing my Dissertation. Most of my educational career has been with special education, which is my passion. Therefore, I have chosen as a qualitative research study to explore teachers' perceptions to implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) with students who are suspected to have a disability or more commonly referred to as at-risk students. Since RTI is a relatively new process and the state is in the early stages of implementation, I am asking your permission to collect data within your school for my study on teachers' perceptions of RTI in meeting the academic needs of at-risk students in Kindergarten through Second Grade in *name of school.*

Criteria for being a participant for this study is to be a certified Kindergarten, First Grade, Second Grade, or Special Education Resource Teacher with knowledge and experience implementing RTI. Participation is on a voluntary basis, no coercion will be used. Written consent will be sought from each participant. Participants will be asked to participate in an audio taped interview and survey. The interview will be held in the school

or at a location of their choice and time of their convenience. The survey can be completed at any time and returned to me via mail.

Please find enclosed a copy of the informed consent form for participants and copy of interview questions. Additionally, I have included a copy of the research questions guide and survey questions.

I appreciate your time, consideration and prompt written response in granting permission for data to be collected from teachers in <u>name of school placed here</u>. Upon completion of the study, the final report will be available for you to review along with ETSU, ELPA studies dissertation committee, and Director of Schools.

Sincerely,

Ms. Tammy Valentine
Assistant Principal, Sevierville Primary School
ETSU Doctoral Student

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APPENDIX C

Interview Instrument

INTRODUCE SELF--- Give some background and purpose of research

State participation is on a voluntary basis – allow time for participant to

read Informed Consent Form and sign

Inform participant session will be taped and notes taken

Ask for any questions prior to beginning interview

Teacher's Name _____ School

_____ Code Given for Paper_____

1. Briefly share your years of teaching and memorable experiences of
   meeting at-risk students' needs in your classroom.

Notes on Response:	Notes on observations of expressions, etc

2. Briefly discuss the changes in special education laws since the implementation of PL-94-142. What do you recall as the most important aspect of the amendment of IDEA in 1997? IDEIA in 2004? The current changes that are in place in regards to identifying and meeting needs of students with learning disabilities?

Notes on Response:	Notes on observations of expressions, etc

3. Mr. Fisher, Tennessee State Director of Special Education, has sent out memos stating that RTI must be implemented. In what Professional Development activities did you participate to assist and-or guide you in implementing RTI? When was each activity taken? Which was the most effective and why?

Notes on Response:	Notes on Observations of Expressions, etc

4. Discuss RTI. Who is responsible for implementing RTI? How is RTI implemented in your classroom? How was this determined? Do you receive support from administration with implementing RTI? Please elaborate.

Notes on Response:	Notes on Observations of Expressions, etc

5. How are students in your classroom determined to be at-risk and meet criteria for Response to Intervention?

Notes on Response:	Notes on Observations of Expressions, etc.

6. Tell me about data collection for RTI so that progress can be noted. How many data points do you need to determine progress? What interventions do you use to gather these data points? For how long must you gather data points? How is the data used?

Notes on Response:	Notes on Observations of Expressions, etc

7. How do you determine if a student responds successfully to RTI? What methods or strategies are used in meeting their needs to determine success?

Notes on Response:	Notes on Observations of expressions, etc.

8. What suggestions would you give a colleague in regards to

implementing, documenting RTI?

Notes on Response:	Notes on observations of expressions, etc

VITA

Tammy C. Valentine

Personal Data:	Date of Birth: November 19, 1960 Place of Birth: Maryville, Tennessee Marital Status: Single

Education:	Public and Private Education, Seymour,
	    Tennessee
	B. S. Deaf Education, University of Tennessee,
	    Knoxville, Tennessee 1981
	M. Ed. Curriculum and Instruction, Lincoln
	    Memorial University, Harrogate,
	    Tennessee 1994
	Ed. S. Administration and Supervision, Lincoln
	    Memorial University, Harrogate,
	    Tennessee 2003
	Ed. D. Educational Leadership Policy and
	    Analysis, East Tennessee State
	    University 2010

Professional Experience:	Sevier County School System 1985-Present Interpreter for Deaf and Hearing Impaired Students Hearing Impaired Specialist Resource Teacher Special Education Consulting Teacher Assistant Principal/Instructional Coach
Honors and Awards:	Sevierville Intermediate Teacher of the Year Tennessee Career Ladder II Tennessee Career Ladder III
Memberships:	Delta Kappa Gamma International Reading Association Association for Curriculum Supervision and Development