One Urban School's Implementation of a Systemic Response-to-Intervention (RTI) Framework

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BOSTON COLLEGE
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ONE URBAN SCHOOL’S IMPLEMENTATION OF
A SYSTEMIC RESPONSE-TO-INTERVENTION (RTI) FRAMEWORK

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by

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ABSTRACT

ONE URBAN SCHOOL’S IMPLEMENTATION OF A SYSTEMIC RESPONSE-TO-INTERVENTION (RTI) FRAMEWORK

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School districts have been attempting to implement the response-to-intervention (RTI) framework in an effort both to comply with federal legislation (i.e., IDEA 2004) and to improve teaching for all students. Extant research on this framework has focused on exploring assessment practices across tiers and the efficacy of specific interventions, providing an overly simplistic view of RTI and overlooking the complexities involved in sustainable school-wide implementation. In September 2010, a large urban school district in the eastern United States began implementation of a reform effort premised on the RTI framework that was intended to provide a systematic, research-based, and collaborative framework for teaching all students.

Drawing on a theoretical orientation that situates reform as a co-constructed process (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 1998), this qualitative single case study explored how educators at one urban K-8 school interpreted and implemented a district reform effort premised on the RTI framework. This research employed a qualitative case study approach, utilizing interviews, observations and document analysis, to: a) chronicle the sequence of events and process of decision-making in the school’s development of RTI; b) explore factors supporting and hindering implementation; and c) understand how school staff responded to the implementation. Findings revealed that although the school adopted the model developed by the district, its implementation at the school, and particularly across grade levels, reflected a co-constructed and evolving approach shaped
mainly by the school culture and community, individual teachers’ beliefs and practices, and the variable availability and use of technical infrastructures. Results may be useful to school districts and educator preparation programs as they consider how to prepare and support educators in implementing an RTI framework. In particular, several implications emerged related to schools’ implementation of RTI: a) self-assessment is critical to promoting quality, fidelity and sustainability; b) school leadership should share power and encourage co-construction; c) resources matter; d) elementary and middle school implementation must occur differently; e) culture and beliefs matter; and f) RTI implementation must seriously attend to issues of educational equity.
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CHAPTER ONE: THE PROBLEM

Researcher’s Context

Shortly after starting my career as a school psychologist, I was evaluating a student who complained about a pain in his head. We visited the nurse, who flushed water in his ears and asked him to lie on his side. Within ten minutes, a bug crawled out of his ear canal. This boy’s parents had emigrated from Ethiopia hoping to provide better opportunities for their four children: Like many immigrant families at the school, they worked around the clock, resided in bug-infested conditions and rarely saw their children. The family lacked quality medical care and lived in a constant state of stress. Despite this, they persevered and were grateful for any assistance the school offered. The majority of children referred to me for evaluation for special education services came from similar economically disadvantaged situations in which families struggled to meet their children’s basic needs and had limited access to information about how to support their children’s development.

Initially, my role at that school largely entailed conducting comprehensive psycho-educational evaluations prompted by teacher-reported concerns. While I understood teachers’ distress over the lack of readiness skills or behavioral issues they observed in their students, the test-and-place model struck me as ineffective for two reasons: It inherently presumed that the student lacked, in some way, the ability to learn, and it rarely imparted information that could be meaningfully linked to instruction. Children from economically disadvantaged situations indeed suffer from lack of exposure to rich early learning opportunities and from the effects of chronic environmental stress, but they are generally able to learn and progress when provided with high-quality instruction (Scheurich, 1998; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000). Although in some instances these children met eligibility criteria for special
education services, I suspected that a more dynamic assessment process, focused on maximizing resources available within the general education setting, would yield both better information about the source of students’ difficulties and improved teaching practices for all students.

This frustration led me to tap into the response-to-intervention (RTI) model, which I viewed as empowering in that it assumes that children can learn regardless of their baseline performance. The model asks educators to be more thoughtful and innovative in their instruction of all children, including those at-risk for learning challenges. In 2004, I collaborated with other educators to pilot an RTI model at the urban elementary school at which I worked. Together with the school support team, I established a problem-solving-based RTI model that included baseline data collection via universal screening, intervention development, goal setting and evaluation of regularly collected data on students’ progress. As a team, we succeeded in using the RTI model to transform the school’s referral process from one that categorized children’s deficiencies to one that fostered their strengths in a dynamic and responsive manner.

This change did not happen overnight, nor was it without many opposing voices. While I received the support of the school administrators, many teachers were downright resistant to surrender the old test-and-place model. Ensuring intervention integrity and accurate data collection proved difficult at times as well, particularly when there always seemed to be conflicting priorities and responsibilities. When I left the school after four years, the RTI approach was still a work-in-progress but was largely successful in ensuring the delivery of instructional interventions with regular progress monitoring: Most of the
school’s disadvantaged and/or immigrant students were responding, with a growth rate that surprised some teachers and parents.

Having attempted to effect change through RTI at this urban elementary school and in several other settings, I began to notice that an interplay of numerous factors – teachers, leaders, levels of policy, communities – influenced how RTI was interpreted and implemented. The problem addressed in this applied study is how an individual urban school constructed and implemented an RTI model that was premised on a larger district-based reform effort.

**Persistent Challenges in Urban Education**

Jean Anyon (1997) defined urban education as the schools and systems that provide schooling for students in inner-corridor, densely populated communities in which vast disparities in commerce, population density, transportation, socioeconomic status, and sociocultural backgrounds characterize the lives of people who live there. More than one third of all public school students in the United States are educated in urban environments (Plotts & Sable, 2010). The 100 largest public school systems are predominantly urban and post large performance gaps between subgroups of students. The dropout rate for students from Hispanic backgrounds almost doubles that of their White counterparts. Districts continue to identify Black and Hispanic students as having special education needs, place them in substantially separate environments and discipline them at much higher rates than their White counterparts (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005). Achievement gaps also persist: On the main assessments of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), White students had average scores at least 26 points higher than Black students in both reading and mathematics, on a 0-500 scale (Vanneman, Hamilton, Baldwin Anderson,
& Rahman, 2009), and at least 21 points higher than Hispanic students in both reading and mathematics (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2010). A recent longitudinal study of almost 4,000 students confirmed that children who do not read proficiently by third grade are four times less likely to graduate on time than proficient readers. On top of this, a poor reader who lives in poverty is 13 times less likely to graduate on time (Hernandez, 2011).

Urban school districts across the country face overwhelming pressure to remedy these equity issues, and the identification of students with learning disabilities represents a particularly muddled challenge. Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb and Wishner (1994) have presented a picture of how specific learning disability (SLD) is operationally defined in urban schools: Low-achieving, low-ability children who do not exhibit aggressive or bizarre behavior and whom teachers cannot accommodate in general education classrooms. They argue that the conventional definition of learning disability does not apply to the population of children classified as learning disabled in inner-city public schools and suggest that discrepancies are knowingly ignored in an effort to cull scarce resources for low-achieving students. Results of a recent study of the disproportionate identification of SLD in particular racial and ethnic subgroups suggest that the overrepresentation of SLD among African American and Hispanic students is entirely explained by their lower average SES (Shifrer, Muller, & Callahan, 2011). MacMillan and Speece (1999) highlighted the magnitude – 52 to 70% – of school-identified students with SLD who fail to meet state or federal eligibility criteria, further suggesting that schools are classifying learning disability on the basis of absolute low achievement. Lyon (as cited in Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003) went so far as to suggest that the SLD classification is a “sociological sponge mopping up the spills of general education” (p. 391). Gottlieb et al. (1994) have argued that if a child is not disabled, he or she should not be
receiving costly special education services before far more effort has been expended
developing appropriate educational alternatives in general education. Increasingly, districts
are adopting the response-to-intervention (RTI) framework as a systemic reform effort aimed
at responding to these and other challenges (Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Sailor, 2009;
Wixson, 2011).

History of Response-to-Intervention

On December 3, 2004, President George W. Bush signed into law the Individuals
with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004). This revised law included an
important amendment to the way in which school districts can identify children with SLD.
With the passage of IDEA 2004, states are explicitly prohibited from requiring districts to
use IQ-achievement discrepancy criteria (Spear-Swerling, 2008) and are permitted to utilize
an approach called RTI. RTI refers to the practice of providing high-quality instruction and
interventions matched to students’ needs, monitoring student progress frequently to make
decisions about instructional changes and evaluating regularly collected data on student
progress to guide more consequential educational determinations (Batsche et al., 2005; Fuchs
& Fuchs, 2006).

RTI is most notably distinguished from traditional methods of identifying SLD in that
it allows early and intensive interventions based on students’ individual learning needs and
does not wait for children to fail before providing individualized instructional support
(Gresham, 2007). The RTI construct is grounded in the belief that early intervening services
can both prevent academic problems for many students and determine which students
actually have specific learning disabilities, as opposed to those whose underachievement can
be attributed to other factors, such as inadequate instruction. With this in mind, IDEA 2004
further permits local educational agencies to use 15% of their special educational monies to fund and develop early intervention services (IDEA 2004, 34 CFR §300.226).

IDEA 2004 represents the first time that the operational criteria for determining SLD have changed since their enactment into public law in 1975 (Batsche et al., 2005). It is not surprising, then, that this amendment has generated much discourse in the fields of special education and school psychology regarding the logistical and epistemological implications of incorporating an RTI model into everyday practice in schools. In other words, the field is now tasked with considering how RTI will be implemented, how and if it will contribute to an expanded or different knowledge of what constitutes SLD and what it will mean for the roles and preparation of teachers.

Historically, school districts were federally mandated to consider a discrepancy model, which required a statistically significant difference between a student’s IQ and achievement, in order to determine eligibility for special education under the category of SLD. This conception of the identification of SLD was founded on a positivistic premise; in other words, SLD has traditionally been understood as a condition in which a severe disparity existed between intelligence and achievement, as measured quantitatively by standardized tests (Batsche et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). Specific numeric criteria were established to aid in districts’ determination of SLD eligibility. If these criteria were met, for example, a difference of 1.5 standard deviations between intelligence and achievement was observed, a student was found eligible as a student with SLD.

While this understanding was often criticized (Gresham, 2002, 2007) and alternative theories about specific learning disabilities have been suggested (Gerber, 2005; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003), this positivistic model guided the determination of SLD across the United
States until the enactment of IDEA 2004. Within IDEA 2004, the definition of specific learning disability has remained constant since previous reauthorizations:

The term “specific learning disability” means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations [IDEA 2004, 34 CFR 300.8(c)(10)].

But, as noted, IDEA 2004 amended the criteria used in identifying students with specific learning disabilities, as follows:

The criteria adopted by the State:

- Must not require the use of a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, as defined in 34 CFR 300.8(c)(10);
- Must permit the use of a process based on the child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention; and
- May permit the use of other alternative research-based procedures for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, as defined in 34 CFR 300.8(c)(10)

(IDEA 2004, 34 CFR §§300.307, 300.309 and 300.311, emphasis added).

Many individuals within the fields of special education and psychology attacked the traditional SLD identification model long before the enactment of these regulations (e.g., Compton, Fuchs, Fuchs, & Bryant, 2006; Gresham, 2002, 2007; Kavale, Kauffman, Bachmeier, & LeFever, 2008; McEneaney, Lose, & Schwartz, 2006; Schatschneider,
Higgins Averill

Wagner, & Crawford, 2008; Schaughency & Ervin, 2006; Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003; Vellutino, Scanlon, Small, & Fanuele, 2006). Several key criticisms have been captured in the literature, including the view that the IQ-achievement discrepancy is a “wait to fail” approach to helping students, the view that IQ-achievement scores lack validity and reliability and the view that the IQ-achievement discrepancy holds limited educational relevance (Gresham, 2007; Schaughency & Ervin, 2006). MacMillan and Speece (1999) noted that the IQ-achievement identification model is intended to document the existence of a within-child problem (i.e., is based on a deficit model in which underlying cognitive and processing deficits are identified). Gresham (2002) further observed that IQ-achievement testing does not allow for the consideration of social and contextual factors and, to the extent that it represents the gateway for students’ access to special education services, it disregards the teachers’ evaluations of their students’ abilities. It has additionally been suggested that the IQ-achievement discrepancy model has contributed to the problem of disproportionate representation of racial minorities in special education (Gresham, 2007). Finally, in noting the failure of many schools to actually use any eligibility criteria to make SLD decisions, MacMillan and Speece (1999) pointed out that 52 to 70% of students identified with SLD fail to meet state or federal eligibility criteria, suggesting that the IQ-achievement discrepancy was not in fact being used and that schools were classifying SLD on the basis of absolute low achievement.

RTI is a multi-tiered, data-based method of academic intervention designed to provide early and effective assistance to children who are having difficulty learning. While numerous examples of the model have been proposed, most models include several common features (Batsche et al., 2005; Gresham, 2007; Spear-Swerling, 2008; VanDerHeyden, Witt,
& Gilbertson, 2007), including universal screening of all students, multiple tiers of intervention service delivery, a problem-solving method and an integrated data collection and assessment system to inform decisions as each tier of service delivery. The multi-tiered aspect of RTI typically includes three or four tiers in which the intensity of services is increased only after the child’s skills or behavior have not shown an adequate response to intervention (Batsche et al., 2005; Gresham, 2007). Tier 1 refers to the core curriculum delivered to all students that has a high likelihood of bringing the majority of students to acceptable levels of proficiency. In Tier 2, supplemental instruction is provided to those students who display poor response to the core instruction provided in Tier 1. Tier 3 involves the application of intensive instructional interventions designed to increase the rate of student progress. Tier 3 services may or may not include special education.

In considering a plan for RTI implementation, schools typically use either a problem-solving approach or a standard treatment protocol. In the problem-solving approach, the interventions are fluid and differ from child to child depending on individual responsiveness. The standard treatment protocol is not individualized at this level; rather, it involves implementing standard group and individual interventions over a fixed duration of time. After a treatment trial, student responsiveness is assessed, and students either cease receiving intervention or receive more intensive intervention at the next tier. The notable difference between the two methods is the level of individualization that occurs before the selection and implementation of an intervention (Christ, Burns, & Ysseldyke, 2005, p. 6).

A problem-solving and integrated data collection system is utilized at each tier of the model (Batsche et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). The effectiveness of instruction at each level is determined by collecting data about students’ progress, or “responsiveness to
The predominant format for such assessments of progress is curriculum-based assessments, which directly measure specific skills related to state standards, are sensitive to small amounts of growth over a short time and can be administered efficiently and frequently (Batsche et al., 2005). Curriculum-based assessments are conducted universally (i.e., to all students) during three benchmark periods throughout the year. The needs of students who score within the some- and at-risk levels are discussed to determine appropriate supplemental instruction that could help them progress. In other words, does a student need more intensive (i.e., Tier 2 and Tier 3) intervention? If so, what should this evidence-based intervention look like for each student so that s/he can achieve proficiency? Students who perform within the some- and at-risk levels during the benchmark period are monitored regularly (e.g., twice per month) to assess RTI. Using the data collected through these frequent curriculum-based assessments, educators utilize a problem-solving model to continuously and dynamically make informed decisions about instructional planning (Batsche et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Gresham, 2007). If data consistently indicates lack of RTI, instructional changes are made to enable improved performance. With its emphasis on evidence-informed instruction and collaborative, iterative problem-solving efforts, RTI acknowledges that instruction and/or contextual issues, not student ability, could be the reason why students are not learning.

In addition to proposing it as an alternative model to SLD identification, RTI advocates have highlighted its strength as an early intervention process. In 1988, Juel conducted a longitudinal study investigating the factors impacting the literacy development of 54 children as they progressed from first to fourth grade. The findings of this seminal work revealed, among other things, the strong probability (.88) that a child who was a poor
reader at the end of first grade would remain a poor reader at the end of fourth grade (Juel, 1988). This finding has laid the groundwork for supporters of RTI who advocate providing early intensive intervention to prevent later reading failure or reading disability (Gersten & Dimino, 2006). That noted, while many studies have verified the efficacy of an RTI model in improving children’s reading achievement when applied early and with integrity (Compton et al., 2006; Simmons et al., 2008; Torgesen, 2001; VanDerHeyden et al., 2007; Vellutino et al., 2006), several have cautioned against extending the RTI approach to classify students as SLD, citing questionable predictive validity and poor floor effects of various measures (Catts, Petscher, Schatschneider, Sittner Bridges, & Mendoza, 2009; Schatschneider et al., 2008; Simmons et al., 2008). Gresham (2007) elaborated on some of the underlying controversies regarding the RTI framework:

The discussion of RTI is often contentious because it raises questions about very basic ideas in psychoeducational practice that the field has not resolved. Eligibility for specialized services lies at the vortex of many issues central to the field about how learning occurs and what limits there are to human potential for learning. (p. 21)

In contrast to the historically held positivist understanding of SLD, RTI represents a shift to a more socially constructed perspective, in which knowledge about students’ learning is garnered by dynamically assessing how they respond to instruction. It operates under a risk model that emphasizes early identification of learning and behavioral difficulties (Gresham, 2007). RTI assessment and intervention practices are not static and vary according to change in students’ responses or circumstances. The model distinguishes itself from the traditional SLD identification in that it is not a one-time assessment and is instead based on a broader construction of both learning and specific learning disability (Berninger and Abbot, as cited
in Kavale et al., 2008). It recognizes the role of experiential and social contexts, e.g., schools and classrooms and teachers, both on students’ positive academic outcomes and on their failure to achieve. In other words, RTI assumes that some children who were labeled as SLD under the traditional model might be more accurately described as receiving inadequate exposure to high-quality instruction. RTI asks educators to observe the ecology of the classroom, evaluate the cultural responsiveness of the instruction and rule out social and contextual factors that might serve as the basis of a student’s underachievement. Donovan and Cross (as cited in Gresham, 2007) further suggested that RTI has the potential for reducing or even eliminating disproportionate overrepresentation of certain minority groups in special education because it minimizes biases present in the traditional referral and IQ-achievement testing process.

**RTI as an Educational Change Effort**

While IDEA 2004 has directed much attention to RTI, implementation requires collaboration among all educators, not just those involved in the process of determining special education eligibility (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; Murawski & Hughes, 2009). As described above, RTI implementation requires the adoption of three essential components: (a) multiple tiers of interventions; (b) a collaborative problem-solving method; and (c) a data collection system to inform educational decision-making. The efficacy of RTI also relies on consistent behavior among educators (Gerber, 2005). As such, RTI cannot be characterized by one educational program or curriculum, but rather, it represents a transformation in the way that systems, schools and educators operate. In other words, RTI is an educational change initiative (Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008).
Historically, educational change initiatives have often failed due to policymakers not meaningfully involving educators in decision-making or considering schools in the context of their larger social systems (Sarason, 1990). Though federal legislation has spurred widespread adoption of RTI, many scholars have documented that educational reform is not merely a “top-down” process (Datnow et al., 1998; Fullan, 2001; Gitlin & Margonis, 1995; Hargreaves, 1994; Lieberman, 2005). As such, educators involved in the implementation of RTI are not robotically executing a unidirectional edict to “do RTI”: They question it, push it forward, push back on it, resist it, and ultimately co-construct it with the communities in which they work. As Datnow et al. (1998) have noted, “regardless of the course of action taken, the agency of educators is part of a complex dynamic, shaping and shaped by the structural and cultural features of school and society” (p. 4). Evans (2001) has also emphasized this “human” aspect of school reform, noting that “no innovation can succeed unless it attends to the realities of people and place” (p. 92).

Notably, IDEA 2004 does not mandate one particular approach to implementing RTI, for example, use of specific screening and progress monitoring tools or specific timeframes for data-based problem solving. In fact, the federal government deliberately provided few details for the development and implementation of RTI procedures, stating specifically that states and districts should have the flexibility to establish approaches that reflect their community’s unique situation (Wixson, 2011). As such, states, districts and schools have leeway in the manner in which they construct their RTI approach to respond to the needs of their respective communities. At the school level, decisions such as which universal screening and progress monitoring tools to use, how often to meet for problem-solving and what professional development is needed are influenced by the district and also by local
contextual factors specific to the individual school community. While in many ways this offers an opportunity to develop a systemic and culturally responsive RTI approach, most of the existing research on RTI has focused on student outcomes or technical features of the model (Gresham, 2007; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005; VanDerHeyden et al., 2007), providing an overly simplistic view of RTI and ignoring the complexities involved in creating a sustainable framework for educational change. Wixson (2011) has argued that, “if we are to move forward in our understanding of how to develop and implement an RTI approach in a variety of specific contexts, we need research that both takes into account the context in which a particular approach has been developed or implemented and is specific enough to provide valuable insights about a particular element of an RTI system” (p. 505).

**Research Questions**

Even when policies seem straightforward, they can look quite different across districts, schools, and classrooms (Elmore & Sykes, 1992). Wixson (2011) contends that, If we attempt to institutionalize RTI practices in ways that do not take into account the contexts in which an approach is implemented or the variability in needs of under-achieving students, large-scale studies are likely to deliver the same findings as have plagued other reform efforts—no or minimal effects. Instead, we need to examine the conditions under which various approaches to RTI are most and least successful … and attempt to derive some principles that can be used to guide schools and districts in developing and implementing approaches that are sensitive to their individual contexts (p. 509).
With this in mind, I investigated how staff at one urban K-8 school constructed and implemented the RTI framework as part of a district-level reform effort. There were two overarching research questions and several sub-questions:

1. How did the implementation of the school’s RTI model occur?
   a. Beginning with the school’s involvement in SAI, what was the sequence of events in the implementation of RTI?
   b. What were key decisions regarding implementation and how were they made?
   c. What factors hindered/promoted implementation?

2. How have school staff influenced the school’s RTI implementation?
   a. How have school staff beliefs about urban students influenced the school’s RTI implementation?
   b. How have school staff responded to the implementation?

**Significance of the Study**

In 2007, Spectrum K-12, working with the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE), National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) and state Title I directors, developed a survey to monitor the progress of implementation of RTI at the national level. A review of the 2011 survey data indicated that 94 percent of schools reported implementing some level of RTI in 2011 (up from 72% in 2009); 68 percent of schools are either in full implementation or in the process of district-wide implementation. Sixty-six percent of schools reported using RTI as part of the process for determining eligibility for special education (up from 41% in 2010). The 2011 survey further indicated that districts reported
teacher training, intervention resources, and data for tracking/charting as the three biggest obstacles to RTI implementation (Spectrum-K12, 2011).

While these statistics suggest that most districts in the country are attempting to implement RTI, Fuchs and Vaughn (2012) noted that of the almost-decade of RTI research conducted since the passage of IDEA 2004, it remains unclear “how extensively RTI has actually been implemented in schools and the extent to which those implementations represent tenable prevention models, guided by best practices” (p. 2). In some schools, “doing RTI” has become a veritable catchphrase for all things having to do tiered instruction and data use, but it is possible that some implementations of the RTI framework hinder rather than improve teaching and learning. Exploring how one urban K-8 school constructed its RTI model in the context of a district level reform has provided one window into those factors that influence adoption and implementation of RTI.

Gitlin and Margonis (1995) proposed that teachers’ responses to external circumstances (e.g., reform initiatives such as RTI) can have constructive ramifications, yielding insights about the pre-conditions necessary for reform. Because I explored teachers’ involvement in the implementation of RTI, this case study may help school districts and teacher education programs better understand how to support teachers in RTI implementation. The findings may also help the urban school and district better understand the factors affecting the implementation process at the local (i.e., school) level. Additionally, the data garnered by this research contributes to the extant literature on RTI and on theories of system change, particularly recent scholarship that explores the ideas of co-construction and mutual adaptation in policy implementation.
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CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I use literature on the process of educational reform implementation as a mechanism for understanding the adoption and implementation of RTI. I begin the chapter with a review of the literature on RTI, specifically examining literature pertaining to the purpose of RTI and what teachers need to know to practice within an RTI framework. Then, I review literature about the process of implementing change and factors influencing educational reform implementation. Together, these two areas illustrate factors relevant to the implementation of RTI as a reform effort. I conclude by presenting the theoretical framework that undergirded this study.

Response-to-Intervention (RTI)

The historical and epistemological background on SLD and RTI provided in the first chapter offers a useful context for reviewing literature on RTI. RTI has the potential to impact numerous areas of educational practice including the prevention, assessment and definition of specific learning disabilities; instructional techniques across curricula from preschool through grade 12; and the preparation, roles and professional development of classroom teachers, educational specialists and administrators. For the purpose of this dissertation, I was specifically interested in policing the literature as it relates to the purpose of RTI and knowledge teachers need to implement RTI. I conclude by presenting an interpretive summary of the literature reviewed in this section.

The Purpose of RTI

As noted in the historical and epistemological context in the preceding chapter, the purpose of RTI has generated much debate within the field. In their 2007 conceptual piece
about what we need to know about RTI, Fuchs and Deshler argued that on some level – whether within a school, school district or state – practitioners need to agree on the purpose of RTI. With that in mind, I have reviewed the literature describing three of the RTI model’s commonly noted purposes: 1) an early intervention and prevention method (i.e., improvement of instruction for all students and SLD prevention); 2) a framework for systemic change; and 3) a method of early intervention and SLD identification.

**Early intervention and prevention.** Juel’s (1988) seminal study of literacy development concluded that a child who was a poor reader at the end of first grade would remain a poor reader at the end of fourth grade. This finding mobilized supporters of RTI who advocated providing early and intensive intervention to prevent later reading failure or reading disability (Gersten & Dimino, 2006). Though not an explicit outcome, there is a tacit assumption that if RTI is effectively implemented, both the percentage of students with severe academic difficulties and the number students identified for special education will be reduced (Wanzek & Vaughn, 2011). Numerous conceptual pieces and empirical studies have supported the utility of RTI as an early intervention model (McEneaney et al., 2006; Schatschneider et al., 2008; Simmons et al., 2008); however, in reviewing this literature, arguments emerged against extending RTI to function as an SLD classification process, citing technical- and resource-related issues, concerns around changing the essential characterization of specific learning disability, and questions about the general existence of a specific learning disability construct.

While many studies have verified the absolute effectiveness of an RTI model in improving children’s reading achievement when applied early and with integrity (Compton et
al., 2006; D Fuchs et al., 2012; Simmons et al., 2008; Torgesen, 2009; Torgesen, 2001; VanDerHeyden et al., 2007; Vellutino et al., 2006; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2011), several cautioned against extending the RTI approach to classify students as SLD, citing questionable predictive validity and poor floor effects of various measures (Catts et al., 2009; Schatschneider et al., 2008; Simmons et al., 2008). Schatschneider et al.'s (2008) large-scale longitudinal study examined the ability of specific curriculum-based measures to identify and predict “non-responders,” finding that curriculum-based measures of progress and reading achievement do not independently enable prediction and, therefore, do not offer more information about future reading achievement than a one-time assessment. Catts et al. (2009) extended this argument to include concerns regarding the floor effects about specific curriculum-based measures for kindergarten students, finding that such measures are not sensitive enough to offer predictive validity.

Further, those studies demonstrating the efficacy of multi-tiered instruction have primarily been conducted at the elementary grade levels in the area of reading (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). In contrast, relatively little research has explored the efficacy of multi-tiered mathematics intervention or multi-tiered interventions at the middle or high school grade levels, and although studies have shown promise in these areas (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2010; Johnson & Smith, 2008), there is limited research to support the use to RTI as a mechanism for SLD classification from preschool through grade 12.

Several conceptual pieces endorsed the idea of RTI as an early intervention and prevention process, but also argued against its use for SLD classification, noting a variety of concerns around real-world resource allocation, implementation issues and the underlying
Hale et al. (2004) and Mastropieri and Scruggs (2005) acknowledged the place of RTI in early intervention but argued against its utilization as a means of identifying SLD, instead suggesting a method that incorporates modern views of cognitive and neuropsychological processing. Hale et al. (2004) emphasized that, “the reauthorized IDEA is clear in specifying that the child must have *a disorder in one of the basic psychological processes*” (p.12), arguing that the administration of cognitive and/or neuropsychological test instruments represents the only way to document deficient or intact psychological processes and, thus, the only way that practitioners can adhere to the requirements of the law. Additionally, these authors raised concerns about large numbers of non-responders, resulting in increases in SLD classification. Hale et al. (2006) proposed an alternative resolution to this issue by outlining a balanced approach that begins with RTI but later provides for comprehensive evaluation of cognitive processes if RTI methods do not yield academic or learning gains. More recently, a larger group of scholars (Hale et al., 2010) together argued that while an empirically validated RTI model could be used to prevent learning problems, a comprehensive evaluation of psychological processes is necessary to identify students with SLD. This approach aims to both provide a balanced and integrative look at the student and ensure that any child identified with SLD meets rigorous inclusion/exclusion criteria (Hale et al., 2010).

Gerber (2005) argued that because many of the researched RTI models are based on highly structured treatment protocols, they do not take adequate account of the real-world variability in instruction and instructional resources. He further questioned the possibly
prohibitive cost of effectively implementing Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions on a meaningful scale, a concern also noted by Simmons et al. (2008).

McEneaney et al. (2006) have proposed an RTI model that incorporates a transactional perspective of reading and rejected RTI as a means of SLD identification. A transactional perspective views reading difficulties as situated in variable social and cognitive contexts (as opposed to within-child deficits) and suggests that an understanding of the natural variability of readers is more productive than diagnostic categories, which, McEneaney et al. (2006) have contended, have more to do with funding and legislation than they do with learning. As such, a transactional model reflects contingent teaching practices, that is, the problem-solving aspect of RTI, and rejects the diagnostic aspect of RTI and the construct of disability itself.

**Early intervention and identification of specific learning disabilities.** A review of literature supporting the use of RTI for SLD identification revealed several themes related to the value of various aspects of the RTI model as related to SLD classification. One theme emerged around the value of treatment validity, a construct demonstrated by RTI practices and viewed as relevant to SLD prevention and identification. Other empirical work examined the ability of specific RTI practices to identify a distinct cohort of students who require significant and intensive instruction (i.e., special education). Finally, several scholars commented conceptually on the promise of RTI procedures for SLD prevention and identification, while concurrently noting areas where research is still needed before its pervasive utilization as an SLD identification model.
As noted, some of the conceptual and empirical literature on RTI highlighted the idea of treatment validity, or the “degree to which any assessment procedure contributes to beneficial outcomes” (Gresham, 2002, p. 477), as a primary reason for considering the utilization of RTI as a means of identifying SLD. Traditional IQ-achievement identification methods have been argued to lack predictive value for the nature of treatment outcomes (Witt & Gresham and Share, McGee, & Silva as cited in Gresham, 2002), whereas empirical research has demonstrated that RTI models yield significant treatment validity (e.g., Clarke et al., 2011; O'Connor, Bocian, Beach, Sanchez, & Flynn, 2013; Vaughn et al., 2003). In other words, the assessment and intervention processes underlying RTI contribute to students’ acquisition of academic skills, and IQ-achievement assessment procedures neither improve skill acquisition nor contribute to instructional planning.

Several empirical studies reported on the value of treatment validity for remediating reading deficiencies of students. Using a quantitative quasi-experimental design, Torgesen et al. (2001) assessed the effectiveness of two instructional phonics approaches to facilitate reading skill development in 60 children, aged 8-10, who had made minimal progress in reading over a prior sixteen-month period in a special education class. For eight weeks, these students received 100 minutes of daily reading intervention from teachers experienced in working with children with reading disabilities. Their growth during the intervention produced effect sizes of 4.4 for one of the interventions and 3.9 for the other, with gains remaining stable at one- and two-year follow ups. This finding is complemented by the major findings from Vellutino et al. (2006), and Simmons et al.’s (2008) findings that, in a longitudinal assessment of 41 students at-risk for reading difficulties from kindergarten through third grade, an RTI approach essentially normalized their reading achievement by
the end of third grade, with response patterns evidenced as early as late kindergarten. Together, results from all of these studies provide strong evidence for early intervention, suggesting that most struggling readers can become at least average level readers if they are provided with early effective intervention. Simmons et al. (2008) and Vellutino et al. (2006) further highlighted kindergarten as a critical temporal window for intervention, consistent with Juel’s findings (1988). Combined findings further suggest that students who do not respond to instruction within the RTI model may require more intensive or more individualized remedial instruction to achieve competency. In other words, the RTI model enables at least an initial diagnostic assessment of reading problems caused by experiential deficits and further identifies a group of students who may require special education services.

Several empirical studies illustrated that by coupling specified curriculum-based criteria for demonstrating academic progress with a maximum amount of time for supplemental instruction, RTI represents a viable option for identifying students with SLD. For example, in a quantitative quasi-experimental investigation, Vaughn et al. (2003) implemented a tiered RTI program consisting of supplemental reading instruction in small groups and noted how many at-risk students met exit criteria (i.e., scored in the low-risk range on several curriculum-based reading measures) at three 10-week intervals. Results indicated that almost equal numbers of students met exit criteria after each interval (e.g., about 10 per week) and never met exit criteria (N=11). Further, all students demonstrated large gains on reading measures, especially those exposed to 30 weeks of intervention. Compton et al. (2006) employed a quantitative quasi-experimental longitudinal design to examine the use of specific first-grade RTI assessment data to predict the risk of SLD and evaluated four classification models based on 206 first-grade children followed through the
end of second grade. Findings indicated that certain assessments coupled with statistical classification tree analysis yielded SLD prediction rates acceptable for the use of RTI as an SLD identification model (D Fuchs et al., 2012; Simmons et al., 2008; Torgesen, 2009; Torgesen, 2001; Vellutino et al., 2006). Results from VanDerHeyden et al.’s 2007 longitudinal multiple-baseline design study supported these findings as well.

Notably, while all empirical research reviewed illustrated the ability of RTI as a means of identifying a distinct cohort of students who require significant support and more intensive instruction, most of these studies simultaneously cautioned that research has yet to determine which specific set of RTI procedures paired with what set of decision rules and measurement strategies will best identify children for special education (Compton et al., 2006). Further, it is interesting to note that much of the empirical research supporting RTI seems to assume that current core general education curriculum (i.e., Tier 1) is intact. In other words, the focus of the RTI research tended to occur at the Tier 2 and Tier 3 (i.e., supplemental) levels, implying that the general instruction, or core curriculum, is effective and intact. This runs counter to the overall RTI framework, which seemingly endeavors to address weaknesses in instruction at all levels (i.e., Tiers 1, 2, and 3).

Numerous conceptual pieces have supported and discussed the empirical results reported above (Compton et al., 2006; VanDerHeyden et al., 2007; Vaughn et al., 2003; Vellutino et al., 2006). Gersten and Dimino (2006), in an argument that reflected the results of the Torgesen (2001) and Vellutino et al. (2006) studies, suggested that the strong treatment validity of RTI assessment and identification processes enhances the effectiveness of early intervention. Fuchs and Deshler (2007) echoed this argument and extended it to contend that assessment and identification are “inextricably linked” with early intervention. Vaughn and
Fuchs (2006), drawing on the results of the Compton et al. (2006) and Vaughn et al. (2003) investigations, proposed that when students require protracted, intensive interventions by highly trained personnel, then the student is in essence receiving a special education. They further suggested that special education could represent a functional third tier within a multi-tiered RTI model. While supporting the promise of RTI as a prevention and identification model, all of these scholars acknowledged the current absence of sufficient technical information (e.g., specified measure of responsiveness/non-responsiveness and testing frequencies, among others) and contextual support (e.g., personnel trained in RTI), which are necessary before its widespread adoption as a means of SLD identification (Fuchs & Deshler, 2007; Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012; Gersten & Dimino, 2006; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2006). Further, while acknowledging the progress demonstrated through recent multi-year implementation efforts of RTI, Zirkel and Thomas (2010) have called the legal dimension of RTI as an approach to SLD identification “nuanced, fuzzy, and inevitably incomplete” (p. 62).

**RTI as a framework for systemic change.** More recently, noting the efficacy of RTI as an early intervention method, scholars have highlighted the potential of the RTI framework as a mechanism for systemic district- and school-wide improvement (Burns, Riley-Tillman, & VanDerHeyden, 2012; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Compton, 2012; Wixson, 2011) to improve instruction, increase achievement for all students, reduce referrals to special education, and close existing achievement gaps (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Stecker, 2010). To some, this implies moving away from the categorical construct of disability (Dentith, Frattura, & Kaylor, 2013; Sailor, 2009) to an approach that privileges inclusion through a fully integrated system that serves most students in grade-level, general education.
Several qualitative case studies have explored school-wide RTI implementation attempts and have found the effort to require significant coordination of resources, leadership commitment, and systematic approaches to data collection and analysis (Kloo & Zigmond, 2009; Lembke, Garman, Deno, & Stecker, 2010; White, Polly, & Audette, 2012). In a descriptive qualitative case study of one school’s implementation of RTI as a change effort, White et al. (2012) found that principal leadership, effective team leadership, state-level professional development, and coordinated and cooperative planning between the district and school were essential to teachers’ successful adoption of the model. Kloo and Zigmond (2009) studied the policy and pragmatic decisions one district and school made to implement RTI in a resource-scarce urban context in Pennsylvania. Describing RTI as “radically alter[ing] the delivery of general education instruction,” they found that RTI implementation required personnel training, schedule changes, time for collaboration, and notably, a rethinking by the school teachers and leaders about their beliefs and priorities relating to including students with disabilities in general education classrooms and what constituted success in RTI implementation (Kloo & Zigmond, 2009, pp. 97-98). In a qualitative study of RTI implementation in three urban schools, Stahl, Keane and Simic (2012) found a lack of cohesion among the support structures existing within the school, noting that teams tended to function separately, resulting in educators “making decisions about children’s lives” without sharing information with each other (p. 20).

A number of conceptual pieces have described the promise of systemic change through RTI and have illuminated the complexities involved in implementing and sustaining it (Burns et al., 2013; Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Sailor, 2009; Stahl et al., 2012). Murawski and Hughes (2009) suggested that RTI promotes a paradigm shift for the identification of
students with SLD and the support of struggling learners and argued that the adoption of co-teaching and collaboration is essential to the success of RTI. Noting that extant research has largely focused on components of RTI such as assessment or a particular intervention, Sailor (2009) contended that as a system change effort, RTI has implications for coordinated teacher preparation, teacher licensing, service delivery, and policy systems. Stahl et al. (2012) highlighted the economic burdens associated with RTI in an era of fiscal constraints, citing the development of teacher expertise, increased assessment and data analysis, and supplementary interventions with low teacher-student ratios as areas needing increased, not decreased, funds. Burns et al. (2013) identified sustainability as a challenge to RTI as a system change effort, and outlined activities in which schools could engage to promote sustainability, e.g., train with sufficient exemplars but train loosely to allow for adaptations to context.

Finally, noting that existing studies of RTI implementation have predominantly been short-term explorations of components of the models, many scholars have called for more research that explores the “real-life” implementation of RTI as a framework for change (Burns et al., 2013; D. Fuchs et al., 2010; Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012; Hale et al., 2010; Kloo & Zigmond, 2009; Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Sailor, 2009; Stahl et al., 2012; Wixson, 2011). Specifically, long-term studies are needed to investigate a) systemic changes compatible with the RTI framework and the impact of those changes; b) the operationalization of the RTI framework in ways that unite general education and special education; and c) the evolution of special education services over time (Burns et al., 2013; Stahl et al., 2012). As related to the purpose of RTI, it appears that for now, the RTI model functions as an early intervention/prevention process and, with additional research, may also represent an
approach for “redefining the education system so that the needs of the vast majority of students are addressed within a general education that is effectively connected with special education” (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2006, p. 60).

**Teacher Knowledge and RTI Implementation**

In light of the proposed research questions and literature discussed in the preceding section, it is important to review the literature about what teachers need to know to support the adoption and implementation of an RTI approach. Accordingly, in the following, I examine literature that addresses RTI as it relates to 1) teachers’ pre-service education and 2) teachers’ professional development.

**Pre-service training.** A review of the literature on teachers’ pre-service training as related to RTI revealed a remarkable lack of information on this topic, which likely reflects the current emerging state of RTI as it moves from concept to research and practice. Of the conceptual literature that existed on RTI as related to teacher education, pedagogical content knowledge of teaching reading, collaborative teaching, and evidence-based practices were discussed.

In a conceptual piece addressing RTI and teacher education, Spear-Swerling (2008) emphasized that pedagogical content knowledge (see Shulman, as cited in Spear-Swerling, 2008) is required to teach reading effectively to diverse students:

To be effective, RTI models cannot afford inadequately prepared teachers in the domain of achievement that is most informed by research evidence, most often lacking in struggling students, and most central to school success (p. 290).
As such, pre-service teacher education will need to include not only information about specialized interventions and assessments, but also more basic knowledge about the big ideas in reading and specific abilities necessary for learning to read (Kratochwill, Volpiansky, Clements, & Ball, 2007; Spear-Swerling, 2008). In explanation, Kratochwill et al. (2007) stated that teachers require knowledge about a variety of instructional strategies and about the specific abilities central to the development of early reading (i.e., phonemic awareness, word decoding and reading fluency), noting that in a nationwide survey sample, universities ranged from not covering these concepts at all to covering them completely. Spear-Swerling (2008), elaborating further, emphasized that teachers need to know about the relationship between oral language and literacy development as well as common risk factors for reading difficulties, such as lack of experience with spoken English, limited prior experiences with literacy, a history of preschool language delay or disorder or a significant family history of reading problems.

Several pieces examined teacher candidates’ knowledge and skills related to practicing within an RTI framework – that is, skills around collaboration, differentiation, classroom management and data analysis. A recent study by Prasse et al. (2012) suggested that many early career teachers, through their own admission, do not enter the schools with the understandings needed to practice with a multi-tiered system of educational services. These scholars called for state and national program approval and accreditation standards and candidate credentialing requirements to amend their expectations of teacher education programs to reflect the competencies involved in RTI (Prasse et al., 2012). In a quantitative study of coursework related to inclusion provided to pre-service elementary teachers during their teacher preparation programs, Allday, Neilsen-Gatti, and Hudson (2013) examined
more than 100 elementary education bachelor’s degree programs to determine the number of course hours devoted to inclusion, instruction, and management of students with disabilities. Results indicated that few programs offered courses related to differentiation of instruction for students with disabilities or collaboration between general and special education teachers.

Several conceptual pieces proposed that pre-service teacher education programs must emphasize the collaborative process required to ensure the effectiveness of implementation of RTI models (Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Richards, Pavri, Golez, Canges, & Murphy, 2007). Because the RTI approach implicitly involves collaborative and iterative problem solving, all educators involved in the RTI process will need to develop expertise in team- and data-based decision making and the administration and use of ongoing progress monitoring measures, such as curriculum-based assessments. Educators will need these skills to collaboratively identify at-risk learners and to develop and implement appropriate interventions and progress monitoring measures. Murawski and Hughes (2009) further argued that RTI changes the role of special educators, shifting their focus from servicing students significantly below grade level to servicing all students in a collaborative way. In order to respond to this role shift, special education programs will need work closely with general education programs to jointly prepare the workforce (Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Richards et al., 2007). Despite this call for increased departmental collaboration at the pre-service level, Sailor (2009) has noted that most pre-service teacher preparation programs perpetuate a categorical service delivery framework and, particularly at large universities, departments prepare special education teachers in isolation from departments preparing elementary, secondary, and early childhood teachers.
In a qualitative exploratory study of field service training for school psychologists-and special educators-in-training, Hawkins, Kroeger, Musti-Rao, Barnett and Ward (2008) argued that the core characteristics of RTI (i.e., data-based decision making, evidence-based intervention, teaming, and problem solving) represent skills immediately needed by educators. RTI requires technical competencies and practice in sequencing prevention and tiered instructional and intervention efforts that have not typically been expected in school practice (Hawkins et al., 2008; Kovaleski, 2007). As such, field experiences, supported by role-specific coursework, must be developed to promote effective interdisciplinary pre-service training in RTI (Hawkins et al., 2008). Although the Hawkins et al. (2008) study focused on special educators and school psychologists, Kovaleski (2007) suggested that because RTI role boundaries are fairly open, general educators must also be proficient with core characteristics of RTI so that the needs of the students can be viewed from multiple perspectives. This suggestion implies that while RTI is currently situated within special education and psychology, teacher preparation programs will be critical in enabling the expansion of the roles of all educators involved in the RTI process.

An additional set of conceptual articles commented on what the use of evidence-based instruction and decision-making may mean for educators, both practically and philosophically. As noted in the discussions above, scholars have highlighted the need for teacher education around data-based instructional practices (Hawkins et al., 2008; Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Richards et al., 2007). Kratochwill et al. (2007) remarked on the challenges in accomplishing this, identifying as a key obstacle, “the antitesting, antimeasurement, antibehavioral, or even antiscientific stand of many educators, both those in general and special education” (Landrum and Kauffman, as cited in Kratochwill, et al.,
2007, p.620). With this acknowledged, Schaugency and Ervin (2006) noted that some educators and educator training programs are philosophically or theoretically opposed to evidence-based practice because, to some, it represents a positivistic paradigm that contradicts person- and context-oriented practice. In other words, evidence-based practice is at times perceived as prohibiting multiple and/or context-oriented perspectives in determining interventions or making decisions. Schaugency and Ervin (2006) argued, however, that evidence-based practice and person-oriented practice do not have to be mutually exclusive and can be integrated to enhance a school’s capacity for service delivery. As related to an RTI approach, educators, informed by research, could select an intervention and/or make educational decisions based on a variety of factors, including data collected about a student’s achievement, values of the community, contextual factors and available resources (Schaughency & Ervin, 2006).

Finally, it is worth noting that because IDEA 2004 allows for states to individually interpret the legislation, RTI is evolving differently in various states (Zirkel, 2011; Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). This would seem to pose a challenge to teacher education programs. Until some consistency exists as to specific components of RTI models, teacher education around RTI will be likely limited to a conceptual discussion of the approach. Further, RTI models assume that evidence-based practices and data-based decision making will yield useful information about student achievement. While research has validated the effectiveness of this approach for early intervention of reading difficulties, it is important to highlight that the scientific, data- and evidence-based emphasis of the RTI model may conflict with some teachers’ philosophy about learning, particularly in general education where data-based progress monitoring is utilized much less than in special education. Although Schaugency
and Ervin (2006) noted that within an RTI approach, educators can select interventions and make decisions based on a variety of contextual and data-based factors, this aspect of RTI may represent an obstacle in its adoption by the general education community.

**Professional development.** Kratochwill et al. (2007) broadly defined professional development as learning activities related to enhancing skills needed to successfully meet the expectations of an individual’s occupation. As with pre-service education, literature regarding teachers’ professional development related to RTI implementation was fairly limited. That noted, within this body of conceptual literature, two clear themes emerged: The first addressed recommendations for how to utilize professional development to support an RTI approach and the second examined professional development around RTI as embedded within a systems-change perspective.

Several conceptual pieces provided specific recommendations about how professional development initiatives can support the implementation of RTI. As noted in the discussion about its purpose, RTI requires teachers to be continuously responsive to the instructional needs of individual students (Gerber, 2005). Because RTI emphasizes this dynamic process of data-based instructional decision-making, Richards et al. (2007) have noted that in contrast to professional development in the core curricular areas, professional development in RTI must involve training in progress monitoring, using data to make instructional decisions, and implementing evidence-based interventions. Consistent with Spear-Swerling’s (2008) emphasis on pedagogical content knowledge in preparing teachers of reading for RTI, Richards et al. (2007) further advocated for professional development initiatives that include both the content and methods of instruction shown to be effective with struggling learners.
Brown-Chidsey and Steege (as cited in Kratochwill, et al., 2007) made additional recommendations on training educators to use RTI methods. They suggested scheduling numerous training sessions for school personnel, which would provide an overview of RTI methods and components, training on how to identify and choose effective instructional methods and training on how to use curriculum-based assessments in each academic area. They argued that this professional development model would ensure that all educators are on the same page about the school’s objectives for RTI and their role in supporting those objectives (Brown-Chidsey & Steege as cited in Kratochwill, et al., 2007). An empirical case study of an elementary school implementation of RTI suggested that teachers need professional development on data collection processes, differentiated instructional models, tiered interventions (White et al., 2012).

A second theme emerged around the importance of the social context and process variables as related to RTI professional development efforts. Numerous scholars advocated for adopting a system change perspective to implement and sustain the RTI approach within schools and districts (Danielson, Doolittle, & Bradley, 2007; Glover & DiPerna, 2007; Kratochwill et al., 2007; McEneaney et al., 2006; Schaughency & Ervin, 2006). In discussing this concept, Kratochwill et al. (2007) noted:

What seems clear from the analysis of emerging models of professional development is that training on RTI cannot be looked at as a function of the educational process distinct from other elements of schooling such as schedules, structures for collaboration, curriculum selection, and instructional leadership. If professional
development activities are to result in enhanced student learning, they must be embedded within a system-change perspective (p. 629).

Schaughency et al. (2006) suggested identifying the areas targeted for change (e.g., classroom, building) and monitoring and promoting outcomes at each area targeted. In further explanation, the authors noted that for a school-wide RTI professional development initiative to result in change at the individual student level, outcomes at the teacher level (i.e., did the professional development result in a change in teacher behavior?) must be considered before expecting change at the student level. Danielson et al. (2007) and Glover and Diperna (2007) supported this perspective and further suggested that researchers and practitioners need to collaboratively identify key factors affecting system change in order to provide the most effective professional development experiences around implementing RTI.

Interestingly, the bulk of the literature on RTI has been published by school psychology and special education journals, which are notably different from journals addressing teacher education or general teaching practices. In fact, most of the articles reviewed were located in Journal of Educational Psychology, Learning Disabilities Research and Practice, Assessment for Effective Intervention, Psychology in the Schools, The School Psychologist, Learning Disability Quarterly and Exceptional Children. This suggests that although the RTI model is rooted in improving general instruction and emphasizes collaboration between general education and special education, the scholarly field of teacher education has yet to incorporate the model into its research. This is both surprising and concerning in light of the significant effort and paradigm shift that is required of educators to facilitate the adoption the RTI model. In other words, information on what teachers need to
know to support the implementation of RTI is currently scanty, and emerging slowly mainly from the special education and school psychology communities.

**Educational Reform Implementation**

To date, educational reform implementation has largely been characterized as a linear, hierarchical path in which directives at the top result in implementation challenges at the school level (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Datnow & Stringfield, 2000; Elmore, 1996). Early studies on school reform implementation changed the way many scholars and practitioners viewed the process of implementation. The five-year Rand Change Agent study (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978) explicitly attended to the implementation perspective of educational change. The implementation process was described as the stage in which both the proposed change and the school are changed in a process of “mutual adaptation,” as opposed to uniform implementation in all schools. The study revealed that although policies can delineate preferred outcomes, individuals’ interpretation and enactment of policies within local contexts were key determinants of outcomes. As such, previous educational change initiatives have often failed due to policymakers not meaningfully involving educators in decision-making or considering schools in the context of their larger social systems (Sarason, 1990). Indeed, the process of enacting policies in schools and classrooms comprises what has been noted as education’s implementation challenge (e.g., Honig, 2006), and represents a key tenet of this dissertation.

The RTI framework is generally implemented as a central office directive that asks school-level educators to utilize a collaborative data-informed problem-solving model to address needs of diverse learners. Studies on educational reform implementation provide a
context for understanding how the method, type, and pace of implementation can influence the outcome of a promising practice (Desimone, 2002), such as RTI. While scholars tend to agree that education policy and reform implementation is complex and that what works in one setting may not in another (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002; Honig, 2006; Stein & Coburn, 2008), numerous studies have identified factors that influence the implementation of educational reform. In the following section, I review literature pertaining to the process of implementation and factors that influence the implementation of school reform. I conclude by presenting an interpretive summary of the literature reviewed.

**Stages of Reform Implementation**

Much scholarship has been devoted to exploring the process by which the implementation of change occurs (Curtis, Castillo, & Cohen, 2008; Evans, 2001; Fixsen, Blase, Metz, & Van Dyke, 2013; Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009; Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005; Fullan, 2001; Fullan, 2008; Gitlin & Margonis, 1995; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). Fixsen et al. (2005) synthesized extant literature on the implementation of innovation and argued that implementation is multi-stage, recursive process as opposed to a singular event or point in time. They suggested that implementation occurs in a series of six stages that often overlap and do not occur in a specified order, as follows: exploration and adoption; installation; initial implementation; full operation; innovation; and sustainability (Fixsen et al., 2005).

The exploration phase involves an assessment of the needs of the school community and the identification of an innovation that addresses those needs. Once the innovation is identified, installation occurs, which involves the development of infrastructure essential to
begin implementation (Curtis et al., 2008; Fixsen et al., 2005). During initial implementation, school leadership focuses on supporting teachers in adopting the innovation through professional development, time, and coaching. Full operation is established when the innovation has become proceduralized into the everyday functioning of the school community and teachers have demonstrated fluency with most or all components of the change effort. The literature has indicated that once the change effort is fully operational, teachers often innovate and make adaptations to improve the contextual fit between the change effort and its context (Burns et al., 2013; Domitrovich et al., 2008; Fixsen et al., 2013; Fixsen et al., 2005).

Sustainability represents the final stage of the model developed by Fixsen et al. (2005) during which the focus is “the long-term survival and continued effectiveness of the implementation site in the context of a changing world” (p. 17). Stokes and Baer (1977) developed a multi-step framework leveraging naturally occurring communities of reinforcement to generalize and maintain change efforts; this approach has served as a foundation for planning for sustainability of innovations (e.g., Burns et al., 2013).

The literature on the process of implementation yielded consensus that these stages are not linear and each impacts the other in complex ways (Curtis et al., 2008; Fixsen et al., 2013; Fixsen et al., 2009). For example, sustainability factors comprise exploration, and exploration affects installation and initial implementation. Relatedly, a school or district may move from full implementation to initial implementation after a change in leadership (Fixsen et al., 2005). Further, fidelity and adaptation can influence the pace and nature of each phase of the process (Domitrovich et al., 2008; Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fixsen et al., 2013; Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2008; Hale et al., 2010; Keller-Margulis, 2012; Kurki, Boyle, & Aladjem,
Fidelity refers to the extent to which an innovation is used as it was intended, defined, or designed (Keller-Margulis, 2012). Adaptation refers to the changes teachers make to materials and routines associated with the implementation effort in order to fit their particular needs in the classroom (O’Donnell, 2008).

Several conceptual articles pointed to the influence of contextual factors on the quality of program implementation and argued for the necessity of monitoring fidelity to promote efficacy of the implementation attempt (Adelman & Taylor, 2003; Domitrovich et al., 2008; Fixsen et al., 2013; Fixsen et al., 2005). However, the literature suggested that fidelity is an implementation component that is often overlooked (Dane & Schneider, 1998; Domitrovich et al., 2008; O’Donnell, 2008). In a conceptual piece presenting a framework for the improvement of implementation quality in schools, Domitrovich et al. (2008) contended that despite research linking quality of program implementation with student outcomes, the process of monitoring the quality of implementation is often given lower priority than measuring outcomes. Dane and Schneider (1998) synthesized reviews of over 162 outcome studies and found that investigators included procedures to assess fidelity of implementation in only 39 of the studies. A review of implementation literature by O’Donnell yielded similarly dismal results in terms of the monitoring of fidelity, and she called for researchers to establish a theoretical framework for studying fidelity of implementation prior to the commencement of implementation.

Durlak and DuPre (2008) reviewed more than 500 implementation studies to identify factors affecting the implementation process, and they highlighted the substantive role of adaptation in implementation as the “most provocative finding” of the review (p. 341). Their
findings suggested that change implementers should identify both the core components of an innovation that should receive emphasis in terms of fidelity as well as the less central features that can be adapted to achieve a good contextual fit (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). In this way, fidelity and adaption are not dichotomous, but instead work symbiotically to promote sustainability.

**Factors Influencing Educational Reform Implementation**

Per the preceding section, studies have suggested that reform outcomes are likely related, at least in part, to variations in implementation (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000; Durlak & DuPre, 2008). The research on education policy and reform implementation has identified a number of factors shown to influence the implementation of educational reform, including (a) the reform design; (b) the reform selection process; (c) the district context; (d) the school context; (e) teachers’ beliefs and emotions; and (f) leadership. In the following subsections, I review the literature pertaining to these factors.

**Reform design.** The design of the reform itself represents a factor in the implementation process (Datnow et al., 2002). Reform designs range in specificity, but they typically address professional development, instructional strategies, content and performance standards of assessments, and to some extent, organization and governance, and parent and community involvement. The specificity and complexity of the design, the way in which it is communicated, and the unique aspect of design-based assistance to schools during implementation are likely to impact how the reform is implemented and the extent to which the reform is embedded over time (Berends, Bodilly, & Kirby, 2002; Kurki et al., 2006; Rowan & Miller, 2007).
Increasingly, many districts and schools across the United States rely on design teams to provide assistance in education reform (Datnow et al., 2002). Design teams serve different functions and exist in a variety of forms. A design team may develop a reform design, devise an implementation strategy, develop materials to accompany the reform, and/or provide training support to schools in the form of professional development or consulting (Datnow et al., 2002; Kurki et al., 2006). Design teams can influence implementation by the manner and degree to which they offer supports to help schools adapt models to local contextual needs. In order to maximize impact, design teams should emphasize high-priority elements early in the roll out of the reform, be as specific as possible in directions to schools, understand how networks in schools operate, and select schools that have the potential to take reforms seriously and see it as a potential solution to an identified problem (Berends et al., 2002).

Studies have indicated that higher levels of implementation are associated with stable design teams with the capacity to serve schools and teachers, gain resources needed to support the design and effectively communicate the designs to schools (Datnow et al., 2002).

**Reform selection.** Schools typically have more success in implementing and sustaining reform if the selection process involves and is supported by teachers (Desimone, 2002). However, in a qualitative study of a number of well-known reform models, Datnow et al. (2002) showed that even when teachers are ostensibly given a voice in choosing from a few external reform models (e.g., via a reform design fair), their voices tend to be “overshadowed by more powerful voices at the top” (p. 35), suggesting that teachers are seldom really involved in the decision to change or the selection of a reform model. Further, many other factors influence how reforms are selected, among which are policy and political decisions at a state level, a lack of time for locating and examining options, and/or pressure
to adopt a reform because there is funding available or because an administrator favors it (Datnow, Lasky, Stringfield, & Teddlie, 2005; Datnow & Stringfield, 2000).

**District context.** Districts represent important mid-level policy actors in the shaping of implementation of reform efforts (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000). Types of district support found to influence the implementation of reform include funding; structural changes; reform-specific staff support; efforts to build reform expertise at the school level; monitoring of the reform use at the school level; and providing for flexibility in allowing schools to adapt new curriculum, instructional practices, and related professional development (Berends et al., 2002; Desimone, 2002). In their study of New American Schools (NAS) initiative\(^1\), Bodilly, Keltner, Purnell, Reichardt, and Schuyler (1998) found that district resource allocation carried an important message to school staff about the way the district prioritized the reform.

**School context.** Many studies have demonstrated the importance of local school context in determining how reform is implemented (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Firestone, 1989; Fullan, 2008; Hubbard & Stein, 2006). Generally, reform implementation falters when the adoption of the reform does not consider a school’s local context and culture (Datnow et al., 1998; Datnow & Stringfield, 2000; Hubbard & Stein, 2006). In their longitudinal study of NAS designs, Berends et al. (2002) found that particular characteristics of schools, such as size, grade level and demographic composition, influence the reform implementation phase. The authors further found that high-poverty schools may lack resources or the infrastructure needed to implement whole-school reform, and larger schools and high schools are more likely to resist organizational change.

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\(^{1}\) The New American Schools (NAS) is a business-led nonprofit organization established in 1991 to develop comprehensive reform designs for what were termed “break-the-mold,” low-performing schools.
A school’s own capacity for change influences the implementation of the reform (Datnow, 2005). In exploring the experiences of two urban elementary schools in a collaborative restructuring effort, Bascia (1996) illustrated how preconditions for change affected the reform effort. One of the two schools had the institutional capability to operationalize change and to be innovative when challenges arose. The other “problem” school, lacking cultural capacity, was unable to accommodate novel situations or challenges.

Culture plays a powerful role in school reform implementation (Evans, 2001; Hargreaves, 1994; Sarason, 1990). Schein (1992) has contended that culture implies that “rituals, values, climate and behavior [form] a coherent whole” (p. 10). In this view, culture is a construct that reflects the deep and powerful integration of component factors (e.g., norms, assumptions). Underscoring the near impenetrability of culture in school change efforts, Sarason (1990) has noted that, “the strength of the status quo—its underlying axioms, its pattern of power relationships, its sense of tradition and therefore what seems right, natural and proper—almost automatically rules out options for change” (p. 35). Robert Evans, in his book, *The Human Side of School Change*, has written extensively about the function of culture in inhibiting school change, noting the challenge that all organizations face in abandoning the structures and traditions around which their identity has developed. Arguing that this is particularly true for schools given their inherent bureaucracy, he suggested that reformers should “anticipate that the enthusiastic embrace of change and the rapid transformation of norms and values will be rare, an exception to be wondered at” (Evans, 2001, p. 50).

**Teachers’ beliefs and emotions.** Empirical and conceptual literature has emphasized that teachers’ beliefs and emotions are two of the most overlooked factors affecting the
implementation of change (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Datnow et al., 2002; Hargreaves, 1994; O'Connor & Freeman, 2012). Datnow et al. (2002) illustrated how educators’ beliefs about pedagogy, race and intelligence constitute how they co-construct reform in the schools. For example, in a qualitative study of externally designed reform, they presented one teacher as saying, “‘The students are not high. They don’t have high abilities. They come from second languages and need a lot of drilling. They lack a lot of skills they need in order to do Audrey Cohen well’” (p. 55) and then connected this belief to an overarching lack of faith in the reform design. Per their study, ideologies such as these, which are inherently debilitating to reform goals, largely influence how reform implementation occurs.

In a mixed methods study of chemistry teachers’ knowledge and beliefs in their implementation of an inquiry-based science reform, Roehrig and Kruse (2005) found that teachers with the strongest reform-based beliefs also exhibited the highest levels of reform-based teaching practices. In other words, their beliefs enhanced teachers’ implementation of the curriculum and associated instructional strategies. Conversely, teachers who had primarily traditional beliefs demonstrated little change in their classroom practices and limited implementation of the reform. In a qualitative study of the implementation of an externally designed reform, Datnow and Castellano (2000) also found that that teachers whose ideologies were compatible with the change generally supported the reform. As such, O'Connor and Freeman (2012) have contended that reformers must attend to the beliefs that exist among district and building staff and develop an action plan to ameliorate mismatches between reform principles and prevailing beliefs before implementation begins.

Other literature describing the implementation of educational innovation has contended that reforms do not sufficiently consider teachers’ concerns, emotions and
understandings of their role in the implementation of the reform (Evans, 2001; Gitlin & Margonis, 1995; Hargreaves, 1994, 2001; Schmidt & Datnow, 2005; Van den Berg, Sleegers, Geysel, & Vandenberghe, 2000). Evans (2001) posited that reformers often pay little attention to the lived realities and human feelings of the educators who must accomplish change or to the practical problems of institutional change – a blind spot that he called “fatal” (p. 91). After studying the implementation of a site-based reform at an elementary school, Gitlin and Margonis (1995) found that teachers’ resistant acts during the reform reflected their perception of reformers’ indifference to what teachers really needed to implement the reform (e.g., time and workload adjustments). As such, Gitlin and Margonis (1995) have theorized that teachers’ resistance to reform often contains useful insights about the conditions that will actually help the reform work and should be considered during implementation. In a qualitative analysis of 75 teacher interviews pertaining to the implementation of comprehensive school reform (CSR), Schmidt and Datnow (2005) concluded that teachers were more emotionally involved in the reform when trying to make sense of it in relation to their own classroom practice (i.e., as opposed to at the school or district level). This finding illuminates the contention that, “what is paramount is not simply that implementing agents choose to respond to policy, but also what they understand themselves to be responding to” (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002, pp. 393, emphasis in original) and suggests that teachers need to find reform meaningful, a condition that is more likely to occur when they are engaged in the construction of the reform itself (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Datnow et al., 1998).

**Leadership.** Leadership has been identified as one of the most important factors to the success of any change effort (Fullan, 2010), and extant research has suggested that a
critical aspect of organizational capacity for change is extensive support from the formal leader (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fixsen et al., 2009; Fixsen et al., 2005). However, the nature of this leadership can take many forms. While a variety of theoretical models have been developed over the past two decades of research into educational leadership (Davies, 2005; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Lambert, 2002; Lambert, 2005; Spillane, 2012; Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001, 2004), two approaches emerged as particularly relevant to the reform effort under study in this dissertation: constructivist leadership and distributed leadership.

Lambert (2005) defined constructivist leadership as “the reciprocal processes that enable participants in an educational community to construct meanings that lead toward a shared purpose of schooling” (p. 95). She has suggested that leadership is the learning processes shared among groups of individuals, as opposed to leadership being equated with a sole leader or leadership team. Leadership needs to be reciprocal, i.e., those involved must be responsible for each other’s learning as much as they are responsible for their own. “Formal, one-person leadership leaves the substantial talents of teachers largely untapped” (Lambert, 2002, p. 40). This aligns with scholarship that has suggested that teacher should be meaningfully engaged in the construction of reform (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Datnow et al., 1998; Gitlin & Margonis, 1995).

Where constructivist leadership emphasizes the processes among individuals involved in an organization, the distributed perspective of leadership extends this orientation to explicitly include situation, or the sociocultural context. The distributed perspective posits that leadership practice emerges through the interactions of leaders, followers and situations. Examining the practice of leadership in urban elementary schools in Chicago using the
distributed perspective, Spillane et al. (2001) attended to situation as more than just a “container for leaders’ practice” and concluded that sociocultural context is an essential element of leadership practice and one which fundamentally shapes its form (p. 27). They further identified distributed leadership as “how school leaders interact with others in the process. It has to do with what school leaders do, the moves they make as they execute micro tasks in their daily work” within the particular school context (Spillane et al., 2001, p. 24).

Relatedly, Flessa (2009) has argued that school leadership must consider the micro-political dimension of change—that is, the power, conflicts, relationships and policies that shape how things actually occur. By attending to the micro-political aspect of school change, leadership can try to address conflict around the goals of a reform; can examine power structures; and can facilitate understanding of the concerns that motivate people to join together in support or opposition of school initiatives.

This literature on school leadership, considered in relation to the previously reviewed factors influencing reform, highlights the micro and macro, context-specific complexities involved in reform implementation. Honig (2006) has contended that research into implementation has historically overlooked just this—that is, the everyday realities of life in schools. Consistent with other literature reviewed in this subsection, she described implementation success as the product of “interactions between policies, people, and places,” noting, “the essential implementation question then becomes not simply ‘what’s implementable and works,’ but what is implementable and what works for whom, where, when, and why?” (p. 2).
Theoretical Framework

Historically, the study of educational reform implementation has been undergirded by variations of two dominant theoretical perspectives, namely a fidelity perspective and a mutual adaptation perspective (e.g., Berman & McLaughlin, 1976; Evans, 2001; Fullan, 2001; Fullan & Pomfret, 1977; Hargreaves, 1994; Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2009; Mehan, Hubbard, & Datnow, 2010; Snyder, Bolin, & Zumwalt, 1992). In an early report of the complexities of reform implementation, Fullan and Pomfret (1977) described the then-prevailing view of change – a fidelity perspective (also known as a technical-rational perspective) which focused on the extent to which actual implementation matched the plans or intentions for implementation. In the late 1970s, the Rand Change Agent study helped shift the fidelity-oriented view of the implementation process to one which privileges local adaptation and local context (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978). Since that time, a co-construction perspective has extended the theory of mutual adaptation to consider the interdependence of policy development and implementation as well as the sociopolitical context, suggesting that implementers shape policy and vice versa (Datnow et al., 1998, 2002; Mehan et al., 2010; Stein & Coburn, 2008). In the present study, I drew from this third perspective, situating reform as a co-constructed process to understand how one school has implemented an RTI model based on a district-wide reform effort. Table 2.1 provides an overview of the three perspectives, which are further described below.
Table 2.1

*Three Perspectives on Policy Implementation*²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Features</th>
<th>Fidelity</th>
<th>Mutual Adaptation</th>
<th>Co-construction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direction of change</td>
<td>Unidirectional, linear</td>
<td>Bi-directional between policymaker and site of implementation</td>
<td>Multi-directional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process of change</td>
<td>Policy development emphasizes planning,</td>
<td>Policy development and implementation are separate processes. Mutual adaptation is</td>
<td>Policy design and implementation are interdependent; implementers shape policy and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>organization, coordination, and control</td>
<td>needed to address gaps between policy and implementation.</td>
<td>vice versa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>so that change occurs sequentially with discrete linear stages</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sphere of influence</td>
<td>Hierarchical; top-down</td>
<td>Bottom-up</td>
<td>Open, multi-level, multi-dimensional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Macro: local variation is a dilemma, as opposed to expected or desirable</td>
<td>Micro: local context and culture are relevant</td>
<td>Context is relational, includes sociopolitical context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values</td>
<td>Fidelity, control</td>
<td>Negotiation, adaptation</td>
<td>Negotiation, adaptation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Generally top-down oriented, the fidelity perspective attends to the administrative, procedural and structural aspects of policy implementation while downplaying or even ignoring the influence of context (Datnow & Park, 2009). This position views policy and reform models as consisting of a number of detailed components to be executed in a specified, sequential manner and posits that implementation activities should closely correspond with the design of the original model. Within the fidelity perspective, changes or

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adaptations to the model are assumed to have detrimental effects on the overall success of the model. This orientation assumes that teachers understand fundamental aspects of reform as intended by policy makers; failures of implementation are explained by structural factors such as lack of supervision or monitoring, policy ambiguity, or the autonomy of teachers who are viewed as acting solely in their own best interest (Stein & Coburn, 2008, p. 3). Generally, fidelity-oriented studies of policy implementation tend to focus solely on structural and technical elements, discounting the role of local context in the enactment of the reform (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000).

The mutual adaptation perspective represents a marked divergence from the fidelity view, which has been criticized for not being sensitive to the lived experiences and knowledge of educators (Evans, 2001; Fullan & Pomfret, 1977; Gitlin & Margonis, 1995). The mutual adaptation orientation attends particularly to the importance of local context in understanding policy and reform outcomes. In contrast to a top-down view of the change process, the mutual adaptation perspective underscores the importance of local, bottom-up interpretations, contributions and responses to policy designs and implementations. Theorists espousing this view contend that policy is really made at the local level and emphasize the actions, ideologies and interaction among implementers (Firestone, 1989; Gitlin & Margonis, 1995; Stein & Coburn, 2008).

The co-construction perspective extends the mutual adaptation orientation by considering political and cultural differences and acknowledging the role of power (Datnow et al., 2002; Hubbard et al., 2006). This view theorizes that agents at all levels contribute to the policy-making process and that this process is characterized by continuous interaction among individuals within and between levels of the system (Datnow & Park, 2009). Mehan,
Hubbard and Datnow (2010) have suggested that thinking of reform as a co-constructed process underscores the fact that educators, that is, design team members, teachers and principals, are not merely compliant actors responding to directives; rather, they are actively shaping and developing the reform through their everyday actions. This means people’s actions cannot be understood apart from the setting in which the actions are located, and in turn, the setting cannot be understood without understanding the actions of the people within it (Datnow & Park, 2009). As such, reform ends are joint accomplishments of educators who are participants in different social contexts and practices, as opposed to products of policy makers working in isolation from educators (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000). Through the lens of co-construction, reform implementation is generated in face-to-face interactions among real people confronting real problems in real social settings. This perspective further posits that reform “implementers—whether they are situated at the state, district, or school levels—are simultaneously the object of reform and the agents of change” (Mehan et al., 2010, p. 102). Consequently, the onus is on implementers to adjust or conform to policy mandates, and while this affords them power in shaping outcomes, it does not always equate to power in setting policy (Datnow & Park, 2009, p. 351).

Theorizing reform implementation as a process that involves co-construction is helpful in making sense of the inherent complexities of implementing policy and represents a useful way of understanding how one school has implemented the RTI framework within the context of a district reform effort. The district in this study explicitly articulated its RTI framework as an effort that is being co-constructed by district leaders and staff in partnership with a team of external consultants. Technical infrastructures, such as dedicated meeting time, problem-solving protocols and professional development, are provided as supports to
facilitate the adoption and implementation of RTI. But at the school level, decisions such as which universal screening and progress monitoring tools to use, when and how often to meet for problem-solving and what professional development is needed are influenced both by the district and by local contextual factors specific to the individual school community. Further, political factors, such as competing interests for scarce resources and people’s capacities to get what they want, impact how RTI implementation unfolds at the school level. These issues will almost definitely involve compromise, negotiation, power struggles and conflict. As such, the co-construction lens affords a way to understand the influences of culture, context and power as school-level educators construct and implement the RTI framework.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

While the technical elements of the RTI framework have been researched repeatedly throughout the past decade, it remains unclear “how extensively RTI has actually been implemented in schools and the extent to which those implementations represent tenable prevention models, guided by best practices” (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012, p. 2). And even when policies and practice models, such as RTI, seem straightforward, they can look quite different across districts, schools, and classrooms (Elmore & Sykes, 1992, as cited in Mehan et al., 2010). With this in mind, I employed a qualitative single case study design (Yin, 2009) to investigate how staff at one urban K-8 school constructed and implemented the RTI framework as part of a district-level reform effort. In this chapter, I review the key research questions; outline the theoretical framework; describe the research design; identify setting, participants and materials; explain procedures for data collection and analysis; and address issues of trustworthiness, rigor and ethics.

Research Questions

Through this study, I investigated how staff at one urban K-8 school constructed and implemented the RTI framework as part of a district-level reform effort. There were two overarching research questions and several sub-questions:

1. How did the implementation of the school’s RTI model occur?
   a. Beginning with the school’s involvement in SAI, what was the sequence of events in the implementation of RTI?
   b. What were key decisions regarding implementation and how were they made?
c. What factors hindered/promoted implementation?

2. How have school staff influenced the school’s RTI implementation?
   a. How have school staff beliefs about urban students influenced the school’s RTI implementation?
   b. How are school staff responding to the implementation?

**Overview of Theoretical Framework**

To understand how one school implemented an RTI model based on a district-wide reform effort, I drew on a theoretical framework that situates reform as a co-constructed process in which agents at all levels contribute to the policy-making process; this process is characterized by continuous interaction among individuals within and between levels of the system (Datnow & Park, 2009). Through the lens of co-construction, reform implementation is generated in face-to-face interactions among real people confronting real problems in real social settings. This perspective posits that reform “implementers—whether they are situated at the state, district, or school levels—are simultaneously the object of reform and the agents of change” (Mehan et al., 2010, p. 102). Consequently, the onus is on implementers to adjust or conform to policy mandates, and while this affords them power in shaping outcomes, it does not always equate to power in setting policy (Datnow & Park, 2009, p. 351).

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**Qualitative Single Case Study Design**

According to Merriam (2009), qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed in their world – in other words, “how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 15). Questions about process (why or how something happens) commonly guide qualitative research, as do questions of understanding (what happened, what does it mean to those involved). Qualitative research involves the integration of different empirical approaches that include case studies, personal experiences, interviews, artifacts, and observational, historical, and visual texts that describe the routines, events, and significant moments in the lives of individuals. Qualitative research also uses multiple methods, or triangulation, in an attempt to secure a deeper understanding of the phenomenon related to the research question (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).
Case study is a common research strategy in psychology, sociology, political science, and social work and is often used to augment and contribute to extant knowledge about individuals, groups, and organizational, social, and political phenomena (Gilgun, 1994). A qualitative case study is an in-depth analysis of a bounded system (Merriam, 2009). “The single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of the study, the case” (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). The unit of analysis defines the case. This research was conducted as a single qualitative case study, where the unit of analysis (Yin, 2009) was one urban K-8 school’s implementation of a district-wide reform effort. Because this study aimed to explore how staff at one school have understood, interpreted and implemented a district-wide reform, the qualitative case study design represented an apt orientation. “[T]he case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, such as organizational and managerial processes, for example. In fact, case studies seem to be the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (Yin, 1981, p. 59 as cited in Kohlbacher, 2005; Yin, 2009, p. 2).

A key decision in designing case studies is whether a single case or multiple case studies will be used to address the research questions. Yin (2009) has offered five rationales for why a single case design may be appropriate: (a) a critical test of major theory; (b) a rare or unique circumstance; (c) a representative or typical case; or the case serves (d) a revelatory or (e) a longitudinal purpose (p. 52). With this in mind, I drew on rationales (a) and (c) to justify my single case study research design. Yin (2009) has purported that a single case can confirm, challenge or extend a well-formulated theory. The single case of one K-8
school’s implementation of RTI in the context of a district-wide reform was heuristic in that it confirmed existing theory on systems change, offering the perspective of how a school constructs the RTI framework within a systems change effort. Another rationale for a single case design is the representative case (Yin, 2009). Such a design attempts to capture the circumstances of a commonplace situation in which lessons learned are assumed to be informative about similar situations. While acknowledging that the construction and implementation of RTI varies depending upon individual school context, this single case study informs the educational community about the process by which RTI was constructed at the individual school level as part of a larger urban district reform effort.

As Yin (2009) has noted, every case study design will include the desire to analyze the contextual conditions in relation to the “case.” Figure 3.1 depicts the holistic single case study design employed in this study, with the dotted lines between the case and the context indicating that the boundaries between them were fairly indistinct (Yin, 2009, p. 46).

![Figure 3.1. Single case study design](image)

A qualitative case study requires the collection of data from multiple sources to explore multiple perspectives on an issue (Creswell, Hanson, Plano, & Morales, 2007). Yin (2009) also stated that it is important to use multiple sources of information to triangulate the
information in the study. Stake (1995) and Yin (2009) identified documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts as six important sources of evidence in case studies. Given the nature of my research questions, I collected three sources of evidence for my case: (a) interviews with school leadership and school staff; (b) direct observation of SAI meetings at the school; and (c) documents reflecting district-level SAI policy (SAI Implementation Guidebook), school policy (Robey School Handbook), and school-level SAI meeting notes and agendas. Table 3.1 maps my research questions to the sources of evidence.

Table 3.1

Research Questions and Related Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Research Questions Addressed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>INTERVIEWS:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 semi-structured interview with the school principal and middle school curriculum director, both administrators</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 semi-structured interview with six teachers whose positions toward RTI adoption reflected receptive, neutral and skeptical perspectives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One “symbolic incident recall” from each school participant intended to provide insight into the essence of SAI implementation the school level</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>OBSERVATIONS:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 SAI Leadership Team meetings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 SAI Student Intervention Team meetings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DOCUMENTS:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAI Implementation Guidebook, published by the district</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robey School Handbook</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAI Leadership Team Meeting Agendas/Notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MEMBER CHECKS:
1 focus group for teacher participants  Q1a, Q1b, Q1c; Q2a, Q2b
1 focus group for administrative participants  Q1a, Q1b, Q1c; Q2a, Q2b

I collected data for this study during the 2012–2013 school year. Table 3.2 provides a timeline of the activities associated with the study.

Table 3.2

Timeframe for Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>April-October 2012</td>
<td>Development of proposal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November-December 2012</td>
<td>Proposal hearing; revision of proposal per committee feedback; IRB application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2012</td>
<td>Participant recruitment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February–April 2013</td>
<td>Data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interviews, including symbolic incident recall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Observations of two SAI Leadership Team meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Observation of two SAI Student Intervention Team meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Document collection and analysis (ongoing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Memoing (ongoing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February-June 2013</td>
<td>Transcription of all interviews (ongoing); send transcripts to participants for verification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2013</td>
<td>Focus groups for member checking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April–October 2013</td>
<td>Data coding and analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Initial level of open coding; memoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Return to data; comparison of codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Second level of coding (reduction of codes); memoing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Return to data; comparison/collapse of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Higgins Averill

5. Axial coding; memoing
6. Return to data
7. Development of themes

August 2013–January 2014 Writing and return to data

Methods

I designed this research as a single case study in which the unit of analysis was one school’s construction and implementation of the RTI framework as part of a larger district-wide reform effort. To investigate how this implementation effort occurred, I collected data through interviews, incident recall, observations, document analysis and a focus group. Table 3.3 provides a detailed look at the data sources that informed my methodology:

Table 3.3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Frequency per participant</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semi-structured individual interviews</td>
<td>Six teachers from one SAI Cohort 1 school; one principal; one curriculum director = 8 participants involved with SAI Cohort 1</td>
<td>One 45-90 minute semi-structured individual interview</td>
<td>Eight 45-90 minute semi-structured individual interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic incident recall</td>
<td>One symbolic incident recall from each participant</td>
<td>Eight recalls of an SAI symbolic incident</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents</td>
<td>N/A – Documents included SAI Implementation Guidebook, Robey Handbook, SAI meeting notes and agendas</td>
<td>Varied</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>Two Student Intervention</td>
<td>Four observations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member checks via focus groups</td>
<td>One 60-minute focus group for all interested teacher participants; one 60-minute focus group for all interested administrator participants</td>
<td>Two 60-minute focus groups for all interested participants</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team observations; two SAI Leadership Team observations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Setting

This research was conducted in the Wisteron Public Schools (WPS), an urban school district in the eastern United States that educates approximately 55,000 students in about 125 schools and employs about 10,000 people. In 2010, WPS sought out the expertise of a team of external consultants from a large educational research organization to support the design and implementation of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) as a part of a district-wide reform effort. MTSS is based on the braiding of two seminal research-based models: Response to Intervention (RTI) (e.g., Batsche et al., 2005; Burns, Appleton, & Stehouwer, 2005; Higgins Averill & Rinaldi, 2011) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) (Sugai et al., 2000; Sugai & Horner, 2006). This model has also been adopted by Wisteron’s state, which has developed guidance for districts interested in implementing it.

WPS named its MTSS model the Student Achievement Initiative (SAI) and launched its implementation in the summer of 2010. SAI individualized the MTSS theoretical framework to meet the unique needs of Wisteron’s diverse population of learners, intending to establish a multi-tier system of supports that incorporates collaborative problem solving, progress-monitoring, and data-informed interventions and supports in academics and behavior in all of the 125+ public schools in Wisteron. The district’s intention was for SAI to
be rolled out over four cohorts of approximately 30 schools per cohort. The experiences of and feedback from early cohorts were intended to inform implementation of later cohorts. Cohort 1 began in September 2010; Cohort 2 began in March 2011 and Cohort 3 began in March 2012, totaling more than 80 schools. While there were plans to engage all remaining schools in the district during the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years, significant changes occurred in district leadership in 2013 and no additional cohorts were formally established.

SAI was established to respond to a number of existing challenges within the district. While WPS made progress from 2000-2010, significant achievement gaps among student groups persisted, with insufficient academic growth particularly among African American/Black and Latino students, low-income students, students with disabilities and English Language Learners. As of 2010 when SAI commenced, WPS continued to face an ongoing dropout crisis, with a four-year graduation rate of 63 percent in 2010 (Halle et al., 2011). Almost 20 percent of the district’s student population were identified as having special education needs. Educators seeking help for students who exhibited academic, emotional and behavioral difficulties tended to choose a special education assessment as a default option because they were often unsure where else within the school district they could get assistance (Halle et al., 2011). These ongoing challenges prompted the WPS superintendent to engage senior staff in conversations about developing a systemic and systematic framework for change. In 2009, the WPS senior leadership team retained educational consultants to begin collaboratively investigating a systemic approach for better meeting the needs of all students. The long-term vision of this comprehensive plan was to build capacity through the support of external consultation while developing internal capacity to sustain the model’s implementation over time at the district and school level.
Further, while this initiative was not a topic of this dissertation study, for contextual purposes it is notable to mention that during the time of SAI implementation, WPS also rolled out a new teacher performance evaluation system. Additionally, teachers were expected to update existing curricula to reflect the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010).

**The Student Achievement Initiative (SAI).** As noted, research on RTI informed the conceptual development of SAI. It is helpful to briefly review the key tenets of RTI in order to provide a basis for understanding SAI implementation. Within RTI, emphasis is placed on school-wide, differentiated universal core instruction at Tier 1; Tiers 2 and 3 provide intensive and increasingly individualized interventions (Batsche et al., 2005). Children who display poor response to the core instruction provided at Tier 1 receive supplemental, explicit and systematic Tier 2 instruction in small groups of three to six students for approximately 20-40 minutes several times per week or daily (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). Tier 3 involves the application of individualized, intensive instructional interventions provided daily that are designed to increase the rate of student progress. Tier 3 services may or may not include special education (Batsche, Curtis, Dorman, Castillo, & Porter, 2007; Castillo et al., 2010). A structured problem-solving process and integrated data collection system is utilized at each tier of the model (Batsche et al., 2005; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). The effectiveness of instruction at each tier is determined by collecting data about students’ progress on a regular basis. Collaboratively, educators use a structured problem-solving model to evaluate the data and continuously and dynamically make informed decisions about instructional planning and intervention (Batsche et al., 2007; Gresham, 2007). With its emphasis on evidence-based
instruction and collaborative, iterative problem-solving, RTI acknowledges that instruction and/or contextual issues, not student inability, could be the reason why students are not learning (Higgins Averill & Rinaldi, 2011).

In considering a plan for RTI implementation, schools typically use either a problem-solving approach or a standard treatment protocol (D. Fuchs et al., 2010). In the problem-solving approach, the interventions are fluid and differ from child to child depending on individual responsiveness. The standard treatment protocol is not individualized at this level; rather, it involves implementing scripted, standard group and individual interventions over a fixed duration of time. After a treatment trial, student responsiveness is assessed, and students either cease receiving intervention or receive more intensive intervention at the next tier. The standard nature of this approach allows for improved treatment fidelity and for a greater number of students to be provided with interventions when instructional personnel are limited (Fuchs et al., 2003). The notable difference between the two methods is the level of individualization that occurs before the selection and implementation of an intervention (Christ et al., 2005, p. 6). However, each method has some drawbacks in terms of widespread implementation. In the standard treatment approach, there are few validated protocols for skill development beyond those associated with early reading and math; there are none in the content areas (D. Fuchs et al., 2010). The problem-solving approach has been criticized as lacking treatment fidelity (Burns, Vanderwood, & Ruby, 2005) and as being a poor match for settings where personnel resources are limited (D. Fuchs et al., 2010). WPS chose to use the problem-solving approach in its implementation of SAI.

The infrastructure of SAI was designed around the above-described RTI model with a deliberate intention to recognize that teams of educators form a collective community that
surrounds each student, highlighting the importance of the individual professional responsibility of all members of WPS community. As such, SAI was organized as a layered approach that sought to encompass all of the personnel and material resources of the district and put student learning at the center. The layers of organizational support for the teams were essential features intended to emphasize that the work of educating all students well requires a district-wide collaborative effort. Figure 3.2 depicts the organizational team structure of SAI.

**Figure 3.2. SAI layered team structure**

- Student Intervention Teams (SIT) are comprised of teachers and meet at least bi-weekly. One teacher serves as a facilitator for the Student Intervention Team. The focus is on the individual student. The teams use a structured four-step problem-
solving process to address student needs. After using data to identify priority concerns, the Student Intervention Team together develops a measurable action plan and a timeframe for evaluating whether the plan worked.

- The *SAI Leadership Team* is comprised of Student Intervention Team facilitators, school leadership, e.g., the principal and principal intern, and the SAI external consultant and meets monthly. This team addresses challenges that emerge from the Student Intervention Teams, and, as necessary, forwards system-levels challenges to one of the Cross-Departmental Support Teams.

- *Cross-Departmental Support Teams* are comprised of an academic superintendent, assistant academic superintendent and a number of senior administrative staff representing various disciplines (e.g., family engagement). These teams address challenges that emerge from the schools through the SAI Leadership Teams; as such, principals attend these meetings as necessary to present challenges.

- The *District Design Team*, comprised of the superintendent, chief academic officer and the academic superintendents, develops the guiding policies related to SAI. Each of these teams was asked to use a four-stage approach to problem solving, informed by data at each stage, to address both individual and systemic challenges to delivering high-quality instruction: 1) defining the problems and identifying discrepancy with the expected outcomes; 2) developing a plan of action; 3) implementing the plan of action using progress monitoring, and ensuring fidelity of implementation and integrity; and 4) evaluating outcomes and response to intervention. Progress monitoring cycles of 6-8 weeks were intended to occur for students needing support or systemic challenges needing intervention.
Understanding that SAI implementation was a process that would occur over months and years, school principals involved in SAI made numerous commitments related to developing school infrastructures and practices that support SAI implementation:

- Schedule a school-wide SAI orientation to be presented by an external consultant.
- Facilitate staff discussion on improving core (i.e., Tier 1) curriculum and instructional practices, including lesson elements, instructional delivery, pacing and materials.
- Conduct an inventory of existing supplemental instructional interventions.
- Arrange the school schedule to allow time for Student Intervention Team meetings to occur at least twice per month. Designate a facilitator for each of these teams.
- Establish an SAI Leadership Team to meet at least monthly.
- Determine universal screening instrument(s) and a schedule for conducting universal screening of all students three times per year.
- Determine progress monitoring instruments and a schedule for conducting regular progress monitoring of all students needing Tier 2 or 3 support.
- Plan professional development to support the development of core (i.e., Tier 1) curriculum and instructional practices, multi-tier instructional intervention and understanding of data.

Student Intervention Teams used a collaborative, data-driven problem-solving process to make decisions about the supports provided to a student and how supports would be delivered. As noted, WPS chose to adopt a problem-solving approach to SAI
implementation; accordingly, the interventions were fluid and differed from child to child depending on individual responsiveness (Christ et al., 2005; D. Fuchs et al., 2010). Per the problem solving protocol, teachers were expected to spend 10-15 minutes discussing each student needing support, with the goal of discussing 3-6 students depending on the meeting time. For a student needing Tier 2 or Tier 3 support, the Student Intervention Team was expected to determine a performance goal based on universal screening data. The Student Intervention Team then identified an intervention, or plan, for helping the student reach the goal, including how often the student would receive the intervention and who would deliver it; decided how frequently the student’s progress will be monitored; and evaluated progress at the end of the recommended 6-8 week intervention cycle. If a student did not meet the goal at the conclusion of the cycle, the Student Intervention Team was expected to adjust the intervention to ensure it meets the needs of the student. For each student needing Tier 2 or Tier 3 support, Student Intervention Teams were expected to keep a written or electronic record of the problem solving and progress monitoring discussion, known as the Record of Problem Solving and Progress Monitoring (RPSPM), for future problem solving.

The Student Intervention Teams at each school were intended to be developed in stages over multiple years with consultant support. Additional support included structured and non-structured professional development opportunities. Professional development sessions on topics including team facilitation and core instruction were offered on a monthly basis during the 2010-2011 and 2011-2012 school years. During the 2012-2013 school year, this type of professional development was offered at the school sites when requested by a school staff member. A three-day intensive professional development institute covering data
analysis, multi-tiered interventions and core instruction was offered several times during the summers of 2011 and 2012.

The Robey School. My case study centered around how staff at the Robey K-8 School (hereafter, “the Robey”) constructed and implemented the RTI framework. The Robey is a two-campus school in a neighborhood of Wisteron. In 2012-13, the Robey educated more than 500 students from pre-school through grade 8, with two classrooms at each grade level. Of its students, 35% were identified as African American, 37% as Hispanic, 24% as White, 2% as Asian, 1% as other and <1% as Native American. Students with disabilities comprised 21% of the student population; English Language Learners (ELLs) represented 23% of the Robey population. While the teacher demographics for the Robey specifically were not publicly available, in 2012-2013 in WPS, 23% of teachers identified as Black, 10% as Hispanic, 62% as White, 5% as Asian, and <1% as other. In 2012-2013 in WPS, 47% of principals identified as Black, 16% as Hispanic, 35% as White, 2% as Asian, and <1% as other. The handbook for the Robey articulated the following school mission:

The Francis C. Robey K-8 School is committed to developing academic excellence in every child. We are a community of scholars. In partnership with families and the community, our staff provides a safe, nurturing learning environment for our children. We value the individuality of each child and strive to empower every student with critical and creative thinking skills. Working in collaboration with one another, our staff models the habits of life-long learning, respect for others, and responsible citizenship that we aim to instill in every Robey student. (Ramsey, 2012)

The Robey began implementing SAI as a Cohort 1 school during the 2010-2011 academic year and was in its third year of implementation during the time of this study. The
school had stable leadership from the period it began RTI implementation through the time of this study. However, in the Spring of 2013, the school principal announced she would be resigning from the Robey and WPS at the end of that academic year. Contemporaneous to its implementation of RTI, the Robey was becoming a fully inclusive school for students with and without disabilities. In the spring of 2011, the Robey school staff voted to adopt inclusive educational practices beginning in the 2011-2012 academic year. As of 2013, all of the K1-5th grade classrooms were inclusion classrooms. In the 6th-8th grades, special education teachers provide “push-in” support in English language arts and mathematics classrooms. Eighty percent of the Robey’s students with disabilities were educated in full-sized inclusion classrooms. The intention was for all students with disabilities to receive the bulk of their instruction and support in inclusion classrooms within several years of the adoption of full inclusion. The Robey is a member of the Wisteron Public School Inclusive Schools Network (WPS ISN), which was launched in the spring of 2011 as a component of SAI. The aim of the WPS ISN is to provide support to school leaders and teachers from schools that desire to develop and expand their inclusive schooling practices.

I chose to design my case study around the Robey’s RTI implementation effort for two chief reasons. First, the Robey is an SAI cohort 1 school, meaning that it began implementation in 2010 and was in its third year of implementation during the time of the study, offering a longer window into the implementation process than schools that began more recently. This was also important because at the outset of a new change endeavor such as SAI, people may tend to have positive feelings, but as time passes, they encounter and grapple with the challenges and factors that shape the trajectory of the implementation effort (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006). With the Robey being in its third year of implementation,
school staff had already negotiated challenges in the effort and offered a more nuanced perspective on how implementation was occurring. Second, the Robey was a “traditional” school, that is, it did not have the special autonomies afforded to pilot schools or charter schools\(^3\) or the additional financial and material resources allocated to the turnaround schools. Of the 26 SAI cohort 1 schools, 13 of them were designated as “turnaround” schools, meaning that the state had identified them as significantly underperforming. The turnaround schools underwent drastic changes to staff and leadership in 2010 and received significant financial and personnel support outside of their engagement with SAI. While acknowledging that every school implements change in a unique way, I wanted to provide a case study of an RTI implementation that reflects challenges and decisions that other urban schools may also encounter (e.g., material resources for interventions, time, staffing). For this reason, the Robey being a “traditional” Wisteron public school made it an apt case.

**Participants**

As this research was informed by a theoretical perspective of co-construction, this case comprised participants from school leadership and school staff. Sampling in qualitative research usually relies on small numbers with the aim of studying in-depth and in detail (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990). When seeking rich data about a particular phenomenon, the sample is derived purposefully rather than randomly (Patton, 1990; Tuckett, 2004). Purposeful sampling means that participants are intentionally selected to represent some explicitly predefined traits or conditions (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995;

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\(^3\) In Wisteron, pilot and charter schools are part of the school district, but they have autonomy over budget, staffing, governance, curriculum/assessment and the school calendar to provide increased flexibility to organize schools and staffing to meet the needs of students and families.
Patton, 1990). As such, I employed purposeful sampling to select participants. Patton (1990) has identified 16 types of purposeful sampling strategies, including extreme or deviant case sampling, maximum variation sampling, snowball sampling and convenience sampling. In order to capture core, shared understandings of the construction and implementation of the RTI model at the Robey, I used maximum variation sampling. According to Patton (1990), this strategy:

- aims at capturing and describing the central themes or principal outcomes that cut across a great deal of participant or program variation. For small samples a great deal of heterogeneity can be a problem because individual cases are so different from each other. The maximum variation sampling strategy turns that apparent weakness into a strength by applying the following logic: Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts of a program. (p. 192)

In developing my sample, I included two Robey school administrators (one of whom was the middle school curriculum director), three Robey elementary school teachers and three Robey middle school teachers. Of human reaction to change, Schein (1987) has noted, “I have found over and over again that the acceptance of a new point of view… has much less to do with the validity of that point of view that with [one’s] readiness to consider any alternatives whatsoever” (p. 107). With that in mind and with a deliberate intention to include a wide range of viewpoints in my sample, I queried prospective participants about their initial feelings about the adoption of RTI at the school, asking them to identify their initial stance as “receptive”, “neutral” or “skeptical.” I developed my sample in this way in order to provide a wider lens into the experiences of the educators co-constructing the SAI model and to
triangulate (Miles & Huberman, 1994) their experiences and perspectives, i.e., accounting to some degree for different attitudes, beliefs and background knowledge about RTI in general. Table 3.4 links my sampling decisions to my rationale for those decisions.

Table 3.4

**Participants and Rationale for Inclusion in Sample**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Initial Position toward RTI</th>
<th>Rationale for Inclusion in the Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robey principal</td>
<td>Receptive</td>
<td>Offered the school leadership perspective on how decisions were made about SAI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robey middle school curriculum director</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Offered an additional leadership perspective on how decisions were made about SAI at the school level, particularly related to middle school. Assisted with verification of principal’s leadership perspective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second grade inclusion teacher</td>
<td>Skeptical</td>
<td>By selecting three elementary school teachers whose self-identified baseline position toward SAI was either “receptive,” “neutral” or “skeptical”, I gained multiple and varied teachers’ perspectives on implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third grade general education teacher</td>
<td>Receptive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth grade math teacher</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle school social studies teacher</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>By selecting three middle school teachers whose self-identified baseline position toward SAI was either “receptive,” “neutral” or “skeptical”, I gained multiple and varied teachers’ perspectives on implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seventh grade math teacher</td>
<td>Receptive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle school ELA^a inclusion teacher</td>
<td>Skeptical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. *^aELA refers to English language arts.*

**Recruitment.** Through my work as an external consultant to SAI, I knew the principal of the Robey and personally asked her to participate in the study. She participated
in a prior study with me and I spent many hours in her school between 2010-2013, so she was amenable to letting me interview her and her teachers and observe activities within the school. I also personally asked the Robey middle school curriculum director to participate in the study. Because I have been present in the school as a consultant to SAI implementation, he knew me and was willing to participate.

Seidman (2006) has posited that the interviewing relationship begins the moment that the potential participant hears about the study. He notes this as a caution against relying on third parties to make contact with potential participants (p. 46). As such, I personally recruited the rest of my sample in two ways:

1. I sent an e-mail appeal (see Appendix A) directly to the Robey school staff explaining my study and asking for volunteers. More specifically, in this message, I explained that I was conducting a study that would explore how the Robey has implemented its RTI framework. I stated that I would like to interview both Student Intervention Team members and Student Intervention Team facilitators for the study. I noted that I expected to conduct one interview with each participant, and that each interview would last about 60-90 minutes. I assured staff that their information would be kept confidential. I requested that they contact me by e-mail or phone if interested in participating.

2. About one week after the e-mail message, only three staff had responded so I made an in-person appeal at a Robey all-staff (professional development) meeting. I again explained my study (see above) and personally requested volunteers.
After my in-person appeal at the staff meeting, three additional staff indicated they would be interested in potentially participating. Another two staff members e-mailed me and expressed interest in learning more but indicated that they did not have a lot of time to commit to the study. At this point, I had eight potential teacher participants and the two administrative participants whom I had already identified.

I deliberately wanted to include a wide range of viewpoints in my sample, so I queried prospective participants about their initial feelings about the adoption of RTI at the school, asking them to identify their initial stance as “receptive”, “neutral” or “skeptical.” My prospective sample included two teachers and one administrator whose initial stance was receptive, four teachers and one administrator whose initial stance was neutral, and two teachers whose initial stance was skeptical. From this group, I selected my final sample to include three elementary teachers, three middle school teachers, one principal and one middle school curriculum director whose initial stances toward RTI were varied (see Table 3.4), for a total of eight participants. I hoped that this maximum variation sample would provide a wider lens into the experiences of the educators co-constructing the SAI model and would facilitate triangulation of their experiences and perspectives (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

After my preliminary analysis of data, I conducted two focus groups, one each with the teacher and administrative participants, in an attempt to solicit respondent validation (Merriam, 2009, p. 219) of emerging themes and findings. Also known as member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), through this process I brought initial findings to the participants and asked if my interpretation accurately captured their perspectives. Maxwell (2005) has suggested that member checking “is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective
they have on what is going on… as well as identifying your own biases and misunderstanding of what you observed” (p. 111). Recruitment for the focus groups occurred through a personal e-mail message sent to participants explaining that I had concluded my initial analysis and would like to check my interpretations through a focus group. Additionally, at the outset of our interviewing relationship, I specified to all participants that I planned to conduct a focus group for this reason so they were already aware of it. Further, in the consent form (see Appendix B), I included language that indicated that I would contact them for participation in the focus group.

**Materials**

I used a digital audio recorder to record interviews, meeting observations, and the focus group. In addition to these recordings, I made memos (Charmaz, 2006) and field notes to record my own thoughts and observations that may be missed given the audio recording alone. A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix C) guided the individual interviews. Immediately after observing SAI meetings, I referred to an electronic list of sensitizing concepts (Bowen, 2008) (e.g., use of data, collaborative decision making) and typed my observations as related to these concepts.

**Procedures**

The data-gathering process included conducting interviews (individual and two focus groups), observations, and collecting of documents.

**Individual interviews.** Interviews are considered to be one of the most important sources of information in a case study. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 2006).
Each participant in this study was interviewed, and each interview ranged in length from 41 minutes to 95 minutes. The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview protocol intended to gain participants’ insights into how the school has constructed and implemented SAI since 2010, focusing how SAI has evolved over time to meet the needs of the Robey community and on factors that have hindered and promoted implementation (see Appendix A). I also collected background information about each participant, including teaching certifications held, years as an educator. Additionally, during the interviews, I prompted each participant to recall an incident that symbolized SAI implementation in some way (see Appendix B).

As noted, each interview lasted approximately 45-90 minutes, which allowed sufficient time for participants to reconstruct and make sense of their experiences with SAI implementation. I informed participants of the timeframe at the outset of each interview and in the informed consent form. All interviews were conducted at the Robey school or at a public location chosen by the participant (e.g., a coffee shop). All interviews and the focus group were audio-recorded. Following each interview, I wrote memos that captured my impressions of the interview (Charmaz, 2006). I typed these memos into a Word document on my computer. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim by myself or a transcriptionist. After transcription, all interviews were “cleaned,” in that I read the transcription while listening to the audio recording and made corrections as needed to ensure the accuracy of the transcription.

**SAI implementation symbolic incident recall.** To garner additional insight about participants’ understanding of how SAI implementation has occurred at the Robey, I drew from the principles of the critical incident technique (Angelides, 2001; Flanagan, 1954). The
critical incident technique is a strategy for getting at deeper levels of social processes within schools and consists of a set of flexible procedures for collecting information about specific phenomena (e.g., how it came to be that the Development Reading Assessment is used as a universal screening tool at the Robey). When using the critical incident technique, participants are asked to recall a specific incident and to recount the incident to the interviewer, focusing on providing (a) a detailed description of the incident; (b) a description of the actions/behaviors of those involved in the incident, and (c) the results or outcome of the incident (Flanagan, 1954). Angelides (2001) has suggested that the technique may help schools to probe more deeply into their processes, norms and cultures in order to uncover factors that might obstruct attempts at reform (p. 440).

During the interview with each school-level participant, I used a variation of this strategy to capture their accounts of an “incident that symbolizes RTI” at the Robey. Essentially, through this technique, I hoped to ascertain their feelings and impressions of what the work of RTI was all about, in order to augment my understanding of how RTI occurred there. Appendix D contains the symbolic incident recall protocol I used with the teachers and principal. Procedures for audio recording and transcription occurred as described in the above section.

**Observations.** In qualitative research, observation takes place in the setting where the phenomenon naturally occurs (as opposed to interviews, in some cases), and observational data thus represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon as opposed to a once-removed account obtained through interview (Merriam, 2009). Further, the triangulation of observational data with other sources of evidence can help bolster the credibility of findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Patton, 1999).
Through observation, I gained an understanding of the way educators were implementing the RTI model at the Robey. Because the “layered” team approach is central to the organization of SAI, my observations explored processes and practices occurring at the school-level teams. This study included four observations of different team meetings, as follows: two SAI Student Intervention Team observations and two SAI Leadership Team observations. SAI Student Intervention Teams were comprised of teachers, one of whom was a facilitator, and met at least bi-weekly. Student Intervention Teams used a structured four-step problem-solving process to address student needs. After using data to identify priority concerns, the Student Intervention Team together developed a measurable action plan and a timeframe for evaluating whether the plan worked. The SAI Leadership Team was comprised of Student Intervention Team facilitators, school leadership (e.g., the principal and educational team facilitator), and the SAI external consultant. They met monthly. The SAI Leadership Team addressed challenges that emerged from the Student Intervention Teams and developed school-wide policy around SAI implementation (e.g., what universal screening measure to use).

By observing SAI Student Intervention Team meetings, I hoped to see how teachers integrated key components of RTI (e.g., data-informed problem solving, progress monitoring) into their discussions about students and development of action plans for students. Similarly, observing the SAI Leadership Team provided me with a lens into how teachers bring challenges from the Student Intervention Team to the SAI Leadership Team, the types of issues that have become school challenges, and how SAI Leadership Team members negotiated the resolution of these challenges and other decisions related to SAI
implementation. Observing multiple meetings increased the trustworthiness of the data, that is, demonstrated whether a particular process or practice occurred with regularity.

I worked with the principal and individual teachers to schedule my observations of these meetings. Because there was only one SAI Leadership Team in the school and it met monthly, I observed two of those meetings between in March and April 2013. The Student Intervention Teams met on a more frequent basis (every other week at the Robey), so I worked with the school principal and teachers to schedule these observations. Observations of Student Intervention Team meetings occurred in classrooms, and observations of the SAI Leadership Team meetings occurred in the Robey school library.

Gold (1957) has offered a typology of four possible stances that the researcher assumes as an observer; he characterizes observer participation on a continuum from complete participant to complete observer. Because I had been engaged with the Robey for several years as a consultant to SAI implementation, it seems relevant to discuss my participation as a researcher during observations. My involvement with SAI positioned me as a “participant-as-observer” (Gold, 1957) during my observations of the SAI Leadership Team, in which I had already been a consistent participant for two years and had developed rapport with the members of the team. During my observations of the grade-level Student Intervention Teams, I was an observer-as-participant (Gold, 1957), in that my relationship with the team members was less intimate and more formal given that I was not a member of those teams. However, with Gold’s typology in mind, in both cases I was able to be explicit with participants about my role as a researcher and tried to achieve a balance between observing and participating.
In a similar vein, Patton (1999) has noted that the presence of an observer can influence the setting under observation in a process known as “reactivity” (p. 1201). On one hand, the presence of an observer may yield a sort of halo effect wherein the participants perform in an unusually exemplary manner. On the other hand, the presence of a researcher may create tension that moderates or diminishes typical behavior. Given that I was a regular presence at the Robey between 2010-2013, the staff had a chance to get used to me and thus problems associated with reactivity were lessened. However, it would be naïve to believe that there will be no reactive effects, and so in my observational field notes, I attempted to capture my influences and effects as an observer.

During all observations, I engaged in the following activities:

1. Arrived at the observation setting about five minutes early to take field notes on the physical setting;
2. Given that some participants knew me through my role as an external consultant, reminded participants that I was participating as a researcher;
3. Used a handheld digital audio recorder to capture the events of the meeting;
4. Conducted the observation openly (i.e., without a list of sensitizing concepts);
5. Took field notes on elements of the setting (Merriam, 2009), including who was participating in the meeting, subtle aspects such as informal activities and nonverbal communication, and my own behavior and effects as an observer;
6. Remained mindful of balancing the roles of observing and participating.

Following each observation, I immediately referred to an electronic list of sensitizing concepts (Bowen, 2008), which are the concepts that give direction to a study. In this case, these concepts included the key components of an RTI model, such as progress monitoring,
problem solving, and collaboration, among others. I developed this list through consultation with the SAI Implementation Guidebook (see Appendix E for a list of these concepts.) I deliberately chose not to refer to this list during my observations so that it did not direct my attention away from other aspects of the meetings. I recorded my observations and impressions related to these sensitizing concepts into a Word document on my computer. Following this, I wrote memos that captured my impressions of each meeting (Charmaz, 2006), which were typed into a Word document on my computer. The audio recordings of the meetings were transcribed following the same process as interviews.

**Focus groups.** After all data were collected and emerging themes identified, all participants were invited to participate in a focus group whose purpose was to check on my understanding of the data and allow participants the opportunity to further clarify or augment the perspectives they had shared during the individual interviews. As previously noted, a focus group of this sort is a way to solicit respondent validation, or member checks, of initial findings to ensure that they accurately reflect participants’ perspectives and to rule out the possibility of my own misinterpretation (Maxwell, 2005).

All participants were invited to participate in the focus group (see earlier section on recruitment). To account for potential issues of hierarchy and power among the participants (Kitzinger, 1995), I conducted two separate focus groups: one for the administrators and one for the teachers. Both administrators attended the administrative focus group, and five out of the six teachers attended the teacher focus group. Both focus groups lasted approximately 60 minutes. The teacher focus group occurred in a classroom at the Robey, and the administrative focus group occurred in the principal’s office. I brought preliminary findings to the focus groups and presented them to each group as emerging themes, each of which was
b Briefly stated in about one to four sentences. Following the statement of each theme, I allowed participants to react and respond. I facilitated this conversation by ensuring that participants remained on topic, but I did not actively participate (i.e., I did not offer my own perspectives as a participant in the implementation of SAI in WPS). I recorded each focus group using a handheld digital audio recorder. Transcription occurred through the same process as outlined in interviews. During the focus groups, I was sensitive about my ethical obligations to participants and was careful to protect their confidentiality. For example, I did not link participants with any statements or concepts that could potentially identify them to other members of the group.

**Document analysis.** Yin (2009) has suggested that documentary information is likely to be relevant to every case study topic. Documentation takes on many forms, including letters, agendas, minutes of meetings, and other types of reports, and it helps to corroborate evidence that is collected from other sources (Flick, von Kardoff, & Steinke, 2004; Merriam, 2009). During this study, the SAI Implementation Guidebook, the Robey School Handbook and SAI meeting agendas and notes were collected to help demonstrate the political context that may have influenced ideologies or interactions among the participants in the study. Given that these documents were not developed for research purposes and therefore may be incomplete from a research perspective, evidence from documentation did not represent a primary source of data, but was instead used to “corroborate and augment” evidence obtained through interviews and observations (Yin, 2009, p. 103). That noted, this type of data allowed me to make some inferences into the Robey’s cultural norms or expectations (Yin, 2009). For example, if meeting documentation was sparse and did not
reflect a problem-solving process, that provided insight about the context and yielded new questions or areas to which I should attend in my data collecting procedures.

**Data Analysis**

In choosing an analytic technique, I acknowledged my own position to the research as someone who has preexisting conceptions of and beliefs about the RTI framework. With that in mind, I borrowed from the influences of qualitative content analysis (Kohlbacher, 2005; Mayring, 2000) and constant comparative methods (Charmaz, 2000) to examine the data. The constant comparative method refers to: (a) comparing different people’s views, situations, actions, accounts and experiences; (b) comparing data from the same individuals with themselves over different points in time; (c) comparing incident with incident; (d) comparing category with category; and (e) comparing a category with other categories (Charmaz, 2000). Qualitative content analysis is a low-inference form of analysis that is data-derived: That is, codes are generated from the data themselves in order to develop a comprehensive picture of the case (Sandelowski, 2000). Given the nature of this study, such a descriptive method seemed appropriate.

To begin the process of iterative open coding, the transcripts and documents were all uploaded to Dedoose ([www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com)), a web-based software supporting qualitative and mixed-methods research. Dedoose provided online excerpt selection, coding and analysis support for my multiple data sources. I used Dedoose to input my start codes, revise and build my code list and to later retrieve quotes to substantiate and describe the findings. I started coding the interviews first, then coded the observations, and then coded the documents. I coded each data source in its entirety before moving onto the next one. Each data source was coded according to a provisional “start list of codes” (Miles & Huberman,
1994, p. 58), displayed in the first column of Table 3.5, that was developed from the research questions and from my conceptual and theoretical understandings of reform implementation and RTI. While coding, I also wrote memos, as I did during the data collection phase. In this phase, I wrote memos of my thinking about the codes and their relationships, which were useful as I continually reflected on the data, filled in and extended codes, and began identifying emergent themes (Glaser, 1978, pp. 83-84).

Miles and Huberman (1994) have cautioned that qualitative researchers “should be ready to redefine or discard codes when they look inapplicable, overbuilt, empirically ill-fitting or overly abstract” (p. 65). With this in mind, I continually revised the start codes to better fit the data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described such revisions as filling in, extension, bridging, and surfacing. Filling in refers to the addition of codes as new insights emerge that the start codes cannot address. Extension refers to the return to previously coded data for analysis in a new or different way. Bridging refers to the discovery of new relationships among codes or within categories. Surfacing refers to the identification of new categories.

In doing the initial phase of coding, I chunked line, sentence and paragraph segments of the interviews into “summary” phrases or codes that captured the essential content of the text segment but reduced the data into a more manageable corpus (Mayring, 2002, as cited in Kohlbacher, 2005). I took care to stay close to the raw data to ensure that the codes were empirically grounded, rather than trying to force them to fit the start code list (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 62); the Dedoose qualitative software allowed me to assign phrases as codes in order to keep codes semantically close to the terms they represented. As I coded each interview, I “filled in” as new codes emerged progressively from the data and I discarded codes that were overly abstract (e.g., institutionalization). The Dedoose software
facilitated this phase of the process as it allowed me to develop a “code tree” that was flexible and dynamic (n.a., 2013). In other words, I created an organizational hierarchy that included families of codes and more differentiated codes that I shifted around as my reflection and analysis developed (see the second column of Table 3.5). My memos also aided this process, particularly when I would need to take a break from the coding for a week or so. My memos reminded me of my thinking during each coding session, and I added any new reflections that I had between coding sessions.

After I finished coding all of the data sources, my start code list had essentially become the Level 1 list (see the second column of Table 3.5). I then began check-coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I started back with the first interview I had coded and re-coded it using the Level 1 list. I did this with each consecutive interview until I noticed that my re-coding essentially matched my original coding, which was at about the fifth interview. I continued re-coding all data sources to ensure consistency. The final Level 1 code list is displayed in Table 3.5.

After the Level 1 codes were developed, I re-read all of the interview transcripts and began the process of combining and reducing the codes as I became even more familiar with the data. I also read the memos I had been writing throughout data collection and analysis. This phase of coding and reflection revealed emerging conceptual categories. I then compared the emerging conceptual categories with the verbatim interview transcripts. I again read each transcript in its entirety to ensure that the categories reflected the data. With this step, categories moved from a low level of abstraction to become overarching themes rooted in the concrete evidence provided by the data. The iterative comparison of codes and categories with each other and with the data from each participant facilitated the verification
of the themes. The Dedoose software helped ensure consistent use of coding procedures and enabled me to group and re-group responses based on the role of the participant (administrative vs. teacher) and level of the participant (middle vs. elementary) to make further comparisons.

Table 3.5

Code List

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Start Codes</th>
<th>Level 1 Codes</th>
<th>Conceptual Categories/Emerging Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Initiation-decisions</td>
<td>1. Sequence</td>
<td>Sequence included adoption (year 0, year 1), implementation (year 1, 2, 3 – operationalizing RTI components at grade levels) and innovation/drift (year 3, thinking about year 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Initiation-challenges</td>
<td>a. adoption</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Initiation-factors</td>
<td>b. implementation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Implementation-decisions</td>
<td>c. early institutionalization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Implementation-challenges</td>
<td>2. Decisions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Implementation-factors</td>
<td>a. scheduling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Institutionalization</td>
<td>b. screening</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. RTI-team</td>
<td>c. which intervention</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. RTI-data</td>
<td>d. instructional delivery</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Leadership</td>
<td>3. Factors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Community</td>
<td>a. external support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Symbolic Incident</td>
<td>b. not enough time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Challenges</td>
<td>c. not enough people-staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Beliefs</td>
<td>d. team structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Outcomes</td>
<td>e. high-quality staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. District involvement</td>
<td>f. principal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Co-construction</td>
<td>g. professional development</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>h. kids need help</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>i. elem v middle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>j. no support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>k. teachers' beliefs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Decisions were co-constructed during the implementation and institutionalization phases. Decision makers included admin, ILT, and, largely, grade-level teams. Key decisions included adoption of the model, selection of screening tools and interventions, scheduling meeting time and instructional/intervention delivery.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conditions that supported and hindered implementation:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Technical structures and supports (protocol, time, staff, materials, professional development, grade-level teams)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, and practices (self-assessment of effective practice, beliefs about student needs, (mis)understandings of RTI)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• School community and culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Leadership (school and district)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. teachers' contracts
m. leadership
n. teacher-led research re RTI
o. other priorities
p. protocol issue
q. communication btw ILT and teachers
r. SST not working
s. intervention resources
t. ongoing confusion about RTI
u. self-assessment

4. Beliefs
   a. kids have behavioral need
   b. kids have lots of needs
   c. want what's best for kids
   d. kids can do well
   e. families are involved

5. Response
   a. lack of fidelity
   b. good in theory, tough in practice
   c. role/job
   d. pleased w student gains
   e. frustration and discouragement
   f. RTI and inclusion make sense
   g. focus on kids
   h. delay special ed referral
   i. confused, missing something
   j. RTI is not happening as much
   k. greater shared

Responses to implementation:
• increased focus on students (Shared ownership of student success and challenges)
• Good in theory, tough in practice (Lack of fidelity due to hindering conditions; waning integrity)
• Who gets what: hard choices (equity)
• Ten grade levels, ten RTI models (other people doing it differently, co-construction)
• Student outcomes are the essence of RTI
As a qualitative researcher, I bring a different lens toward validity and reliability than that which is brought to traditional, quantitative studies (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In particular, I must attend to the values and perspectives I bring to the research, particularly as a sole researcher, to ensure that my findings are trustworthy (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Lincoln and Guba (1985) have suggested that trustworthiness in qualitative inquiry should meet the following criteria: credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability. Within these criteria, they identified specific methodological strategies for demonstrating qualitative trustworthiness, such as conducting member checks when coding; triangulating data sources; confirming results with participants; practicing reflexivity; developing thick description of the context; and utilizing peer debriefing (Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

With these strategies in mind, I took several steps to improve the trustworthiness of the data. First, educators’ remarks were triangulated with each other, acknowledging that teachers may experience SAI a particular way depending on their background and attitudes. Also for this reason, I chose to interview eight participants in order to improve triangulation and overall trustworthiness of the data. The focus groups provided the participants with an

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Trustworthiness

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opportunity to clarify comments made in earlier interviews or to explain incidents noted during observations. I triangulated interview information with observational data and the documents. Each data source helped to corroborate educators’ comments with their practices.

Additionally, I employed member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to take the data back to the participants so that they could confirm the credibility of the information and verify that I organized it in a way that reflected their experiences. I did this in two ways. First, I sent all participants transcripts of our interviews to give them an opportunity to add important perspectives that may have been overlooked during our interviews. No participant responded with any changes and/or additions to his or her transcript. Secondly, at the completion of the study, I invited participants to engage in a focus group to ensure that I captured the data correctly. To account for potential issues of hierarchy and power among the participants (Kitzinger, 1995), I conducted two separate focus groups: one for the administrators and one for the teachers.

This study generated an abundance of data on an RTI implementation process that was complex and multi-faceted. As a former school psychologist who has worked with RTI for about a decade and as a consultant to the staff at the Robey during their three-year implementation process, I brought a particular, biased perspective to the data. Throughout the data analysis process, I tried to acknowledge my own reflexivity and attempted to minimize the influence of my bias by, to the degree possible, bracketing my preconceptions in order to approach the data as openly as possible (Gearing, 2004). For example, as I began the process of coding, I found myself “reading between the lines” of some of the interview text, remembering my own direct experiences with the implementation process at the Robey across three years. I intentionally identified and noted these instances to illuminate for me
where I had particularly subjective feelings. These notations were helpful as I began reducing
codes because I was attuned to where my subjectivity lay and to which pieces of data I may
be giving undue weight. I continuously returned to the raw data to ensure my codes and
categories captured what the participants revealed to me. I also solicited the help of a “critical
friend,” also known as a peer review or debrief (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), to provide further
protection from bias and self-delusion (Foulger, 2010, p. 140; Miles & Huberman, 1994). My
critical friend was a colleague familiar with RTI and with this reform effort, but with no
experience at the Robey in particular. During the data analysis stage, I met with her about
once per month from May-August, 2013 for about 90 minutes at a time to react to my
analysis. More specifically, I provided her with the Level 1 list of codes and asked her to
code sections of the raw interview data. We then compared her codes with my codes and
discussed similarities and discrepancies. She also acted as a sounding board for my analysis
and asked questions about my interpretations. In this way, she forced me to account for my
analysis and to thus construct a finer and clearer analysis.

Finally, Patton (1999) has argued that keeping findings in context is a fundamental
principle of qualitative analysis, noting the importance of reporting both methods and results
in their proper contexts. As such, in reporting my findings, I acknowledged the rationale for
the purposeful sample I selected and was careful not to overly extrapolate or generalize the
findings to other situations or people.

Rigor

All researchers take sides, or are partisans for one point of view or another.
Value-free interpretive research is impossible. This is the case because every
researcher brings preconceptions and interpretations to the problem being studied.
The term “hermeneutical circle or situation” refers to this basic fact of research. All scholars are caught in the circle of interpretation. They can never be free of the hermeneutical situation. This means that scholars must state beforehand their prior interpretations of the phenomenon being investigated. Unless these meanings and values are clarified, their effects on subsequent interpretations remain clouded and often misunderstood (Denzin, 1989, p. 23).

My interest in the RTI framework stems from eight years of experience working as a school psychologist in preschool-grade 12 urban settings from 2001-2009. In this capacity, one of my chief responsibilities included evaluating children to determine their eligibility for special education services. Although in some instances these children met eligibility criteria for special education services, I suspected that a more dynamic assessment process, focused on maximizing resources available within the general education setting, would more precisely identify the source of students’ difficulties and yield improved teaching practices for all students. This perception led me to tap into the RTI model, which I viewed as empowering in that it assumes that children can learn. Since 2004, I have been supporting the implementation of RTI in several roles. In addition to my work as a school psychologist, I am now an educational consultant to the district described in this dissertation and I supported the Robey specifically from 2010-2013. My familiarity with RTI through my work undoubtedly colors my perspective on the subject. I attempted to minimize the influence of all sources of my bias by bracketing my beliefs in order to approach the data as openly as possible (Gearing, 2004). I involved a critical friend to help me account for my analysis and reflection on the data. Additionally, the incorporated member checks helped me to “verify” my
understandings and minimize the influence of my biases in the data interpretation and analysis.

**Ethical Issues**  

While the risks involved for those who choose to participate in this research should be minimal, it would be imprudent to suggest that none exist. Participating in SAI as a cohort 1 school was a voluntary decision made by the school leader; as such, faculty at the school may have felt some pressure from the principal and from peers within the district who observed the fidelity and success of implementation. Therefore, any findings from this research that might suggest that SAI is not operating as planned could be disheartening to some educators involved. To address this concern, the findings discovered through this research were first presented to participants, allowing them to add important perspectives or to ask me to remove any inaccurate or professionally jeopardizing statements.

In all interviews, I explained to participants that they could end the interview at any time and that they could refuse to answer questions for any reason. I also reminded them that I intended to keep their remarks confidential, that is, by never using their real names, or those of anyone else at their school, in any writing and by changing non-essential “contextual” aspects of what I write (e.g., the location of the school) so as to protect participants’ identities. The schools, school district and reform effort were each assigned a pseudonym that has been used in all writing.

In addition, I explained to participants that I was looking for themes and trends, not individual perspectives. Controversial or provocative statements were not included in my

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4 This section of the methodology was informed by an IRB proposal completed with the help of Professor Patrick McQuillan for an independent study (ED859) conducted during Fall 2011.
writing unless the opinion represented a point of view that was to some significant degree “shared” within the school community. If one teacher did not like a particular aspect of the framework, for example, that was of little interest unless others shared that view and provided a rationale for their thinking.

I took measures to protect the identity of those who participated in this research. Each participant was assigned a code letter so that even if someone were to gain access to research data, they would be unable to identify any participant by name since I kept the list of names separate from the coded data sources. In addition, all electronic data has been stored on my password-protected laptop computer. All hard materials, such as copies of the meeting agendas, have been kept in my locked office in my locked home.

Finally, as noted, I bring my own experiences and perspectives to this study. I attempted to minimize the influence of all sources of my bias by, to the degree possible, bracketing my preconceptions, beliefs and hopes in order to approach the data analysis as openly as possible (Gearing, 2004). Additionally, the theoretical sampling incorporated into the focus groups and the use of a critical friend helped me to “check” my understandings and minimize the influence of my biases in the data interpretation and analysis.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE PROCESS OF IMPLEMENTATION

In chapters four and five, I use insights generated by the data analysis methods described in chapter three to present answers to my two overarching research questions and related sub-questions:

1. How did the implementation of the school’s RTI model occur?
   a. Beginning with the school’s involvement in SAI, what was the sequence of events in the implementation of RTI?
   b. What were key decisions regarding implementation and how were they made?
   c. What factors hindered/promoted implementation?

2. How have school staff influenced the school’s RTI implementation?
   a. How have school staff beliefs about urban students influenced the school’s RTI implementation?
   b. How have school staff responded to the implementation?

My analysis of the data substantiated the view that education policy and reform implementation is complex and that what works in one setting may not in another (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Datnow et al., 2002; Honig, 2006; Stein & Coburn, 2008), revealing that the implementation of RTI at the Robey was a dynamic process, co-constructed by numerous influences and resulting in varied responses. Although the school adopted the SAI model that was developed by the district, its implementation at the school and across grade levels reflected a co-constructed and evolving approach shaped by the school culture and community, individual teachers’ beliefs and practices, and the variable use of technical infrastructures. Table 4.1 presents the major categories of influencers on the construction of
RTI and associated concepts that resulted from the analytic methods described in chapter three.

Table 4.1

*Findings Presented as Major Categories of Influencers on the Construction of RTI*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Categories of Influencers on the Construction of RTI</th>
<th>Associated Concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Process of implementation</td>
<td>Co-construction; exploration; adoption; implementation; decision-making; innovation; drift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting/hindering conditions</td>
<td>Co-construction; technical supports and structures; grade-level teams; teachers’ beliefs and practices; school community; leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responses to implementation</td>
<td>Co-construction; focus on students; shared ownership; fidelity of implementation; equity; variations in implementation; student outcomes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this chapter, I attend specifically to the process of implementation. To provide a link between the data and the resulting concepts, I include questions from the interview protocol that helped to generate participants’ responses.

**Process of Implementation**

Interviews, observations and document analysis revealed that the implementation of RTI at the Robey occurred in a recursive and complex process. It became clear that the Robey’s implementation effort followed an implementation framework described by many other scholars (e.g., see Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2008; Fullan & Pomfret, 1977), which has established that although there are stages of implementation (e.g., exploration, installation, initial implementation, full implementation, innovation, and sustainability), these stages often overlap and do not occur in a specified order (Fixsen et al., 2005). In the Robey’s implementation, innovation represented a key feature. In the following sub-sections,
I provide a contextual background to aid in understanding how implementation occurred; then, I illuminate each phase of implementation at the Robey. Table 4.2 details the timeframe of implementation and provides a brief summary of the key decisions and how decision-making occurred.

Table 4.2

*Implementation Process*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timeframe</th>
<th>Implementation phase</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009-10</td>
<td>Exploration/Adoption</td>
<td>Staff explored RTI as an alternative to an ineffective SST structure. Decision to adopt SAI was largely made by principal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-12</td>
<td>Implementation/Innovation</td>
<td>Decisions were co-constructed by admin, grade-level teams and, largely, ILT. Key decisions included the selection of screening tools and interventions, scheduling meeting times and instructional/intervention delivery.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012-13</td>
<td>Innovation/Drift</td>
<td>Decisions were co-constructed by admin, ILT, and, largely, grade-level teams. Key decisions included whether and how to continue with RTI, scheduling problem-solving meeting times and instructional/intervention delivery. Innovation of practice and drift from the model were observed.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Context**

The co-construction perspective posits that people’s actions cannot be understood apart from the setting in which the actions are located, and in turn, the setting cannot be understood without understanding the actions of the people within it (Datnow & Park, 2009).
As such, before describing how staff at the Robey came to adopt and implement the RTI approach, I provide an exploration of contextual factors as relevant background information.

The District. WPS is an urban school district in the eastern United States that as of 2012-2013 educated approximately 55,000 students in about 125 schools and employs about 10,000 people. As described in chapter one, urban school districts across the country face overwhelming pressure to remedy issues related to providing equitable educational experiences to all students, including those who are racially diverse and/or socioeconomically disadvantaged. The student body is racially diverse: in 2012-2013, 40% of students identified as Hispanic, 36% as Black, 13% as White, nine percent as Asian, and two percent as other. Seventy-five percent of students were eligible to receive free and reduced-price meals in school, and 53% are eligible for food stamps. In 2012-2013 in WPS, 22% of teachers identified as Black, 10% as Hispanic, 63% as White, five percent as Asian, and less than one percent as other. Forty percent of WPS principals identified as Black, 13% as Hispanic, 45% as White, and two percent as Asian.

While WPS made progress from 2000-2010, significant achievement gaps among student groups persisted, with insufficient academic growth on state achievement tests observed particularly among African American/Black and Latino students, low-income students, students with disabilities and English Language Learners — the same challenges that have historically plagued many urban districts (Ladson-Billings, 2006). WPS also continues to face an ongoing dropout crisis, with a four-year graduation rate of 63% in 2010, the year that SAI was adopted. At that time, almost 20% of the district’s student population was identified as having special education needs. Educators seeking help for students who

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5 Demographic information retrieved from “Wisteron Public Schools” website.
exhibited academic, emotional and behavioral difficulties tended to choose a special education assessment as a default option because they were often unsure where else within the school district they could get assistance (Halle et al., 2011). These ongoing challenges prompted the WPS superintendent in 2009 to engage senior staff in conversations about developing a systemic and systematic framework for change. Fixsen et al. (2005) have contended that implementation of a school-wide change model is a process and not a one-time event, and that this multi-stage process begins with exploration and adoption. Consistent with this, in 2009, the WPS senior leadership team retained a team of educational consultants to begin collaboratively exploring a systemic MTSS framework for better meeting the needs of all students. During 2011, the MTSS model was formally adopted by Wisteron’s state, and the state has since issued guidance for its implementation at the district level.

WPS named its MTSS model the Student Achievement Initiative (SAI) and formally launched its implementation in the summer of 2010. SAI individualized the MTSS theoretical framework to meet the unique needs of Wisteron’s diverse population of learners, intending to establish a multi-tier system of supports that incorporates collaborative problem solving, progress-monitoring, and data-informed interventions and supports in academics and behavior in all of the 125+ public schools in Wisteron. The district-wide rollout of SAI was coordinated by Mark Halle (a pseudonym), the then assistant superintendent of special education and student services. Mr. Halle’s role, in addition to overseeing the policies and procedures related to special education in the district, was to work with school leaders and the team of seven external consultants to develop essential SAI infrastructures in the schools. One external consultant was assigned to each SAI school to support implementation; I was
the external consultant assigned to the Robey. Mr. Halle intended for SAI to be rolled out over four cohorts of approximately 30 schools per cohort. The experiences of and feedback from early cohorts was expected to inform implementation of later cohorts. Cohort 1 began in September 2010; Cohort 2 began in March 2011 and Cohort 3 began in March 2012, totaling more than 80 schools. However, changes in district leadership during 2012-13, including the reassignment of Mr. Halle and the retirement of the district superintendent, slowed the process of implementation. Though several additional schools engaged in the work during 2012-13, Cohort 4 was never formally established.

**The Student Achievement Initiative (SAI) in WPS.** Described in more detail in chapter three, the conceptual development of SAI was informed by the RTI framework with collaborative, data-informed problem-solving teams representing a key organizational feature. It espoused the following theory of action:

**IF** district educators **deliver** effective instruction that is both rigorous and relevant, and develops the infrastructure necessary to increase the knowledge and skills to support and implement that instruction, **THEN** instructional practice will improve in **every school** and the quality of students’ work will increase. In addition, **IF** every employee throughout the district (schools and central office) understands how his/her role impacts student performance and accepts **personal responsibility** for enabling all students to excel, **THEN** the achievement of students at all performance levels will accelerate, WPS will close the achievement gap, and students will graduate with the knowledge and skills to be successful in postsecondary pursuits and in life (Halle et al., 2011, p. 2, bold in the original).
SAI was designed as a layered approach that sought to encompass all of the personnel and material resources of the district and put student learning at the center. Figure 4.1 depicts the organizational team structure of SAI.

![SAI layered team structure diagram]

**Figure 4.1.** SAI layered team structure

WPS developed an SAI Implementation Guidebook (hereafter, “the Guidebook”), intended to outline how each of these teams should operate, emphasizing the use of a collaborative, data-driven problem-solving process to make decisions about the supports provided to a student and how supports would be delivered. WPS chose to adopt a problem-solving approach to SAI implementation, meaning that tiered interventions were fluid and differed from child to child depending on individual responsiveness (Christ et al., 2005; D. Fuchs et al., 2010). The Guidebook provided schools with timeframes, tools (e.g., sample meeting agendas, data
organizers, planning checklists, parent letters, self-assessments) and problem-solving protocols for establishing and implementing key SAI infrastructures, including:

- the collaborative data-driven problem solving process;
- school-level implementation teams; and
- the adoption of a self-assessment tool to evaluate the extent to which critical components of SAI are being implemented with fidelity.

The Guidebook was first distributed to schools in October of 2010 and was updated twice to incorporate adaptions and innovations resulting from feedback from schools. Notably, no version of the Guidebook contained specific information about which universal screening and progress monitoring tools to use; which interventions to use; or how to deliver interventions within the constraints of the school schedule and available qualified personnel. Charles Payne (2008) has written about the “pathology of bureaucracy” in urban districts, wherein fragmentation, over-centralization, cronyism, and hierarchical complexity in central office administration act as a hindrance to effective policy implementation (pp. 122-124). As an external consultant to WPS, I observed this sort of bureaucratic pathology at play in the district administration’s inability to make clear and concrete decisions about critical RTI components (e.g., including in the Guidebook which universal screenings should be used district-wide).

**The Robey School.** The Robey K-8 School is a two-campus school in Wisteron. In 2012-13, the Robey educated more than 500 students from pre-school through grade 8, with two classrooms at each grade level. Of its students, 35% were identified as African American, 37% as Hispanic, 24% as White, 2% as Asian, 1% as other and <1% as Native American. Students with disabilities comprised 21% of the student population; English
Language Learners (ELLs) represented 23% of the Robey population. While the teacher demographics for the Robey specifically were not publicly available, in 2012-2013 in WPS, 23% of teachers identified as Black, 10% as Hispanic, 62% as White, 5% as Asian, and < 1% as other. In 2012-2013 in WPS, 47% of principals identified as Black, 16% as Hispanic, 35% as White, 2% as Asian, and < 1% as other. Table 4.3 presents names and descriptive background information of the teachers and administrators who participated in this study.

Table 4.3

Descriptive Background of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Position toward RTI</th>
<th>Yrs Tchng</th>
<th>Yrs at Robey</th>
<th>Highest Degree</th>
<th>Area(s) of Cert.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Catherine”</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Receptive</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>M.Ed.</td>
<td>Elem. ed; Admin K1-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Paul”</td>
<td>Middle school curriculum director</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>M.Ed.</td>
<td>Elem. ed; Science 6-8; Admin 5-8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Jaime”</td>
<td>2nd grade inclusion</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Skeptical</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>M.Ed.</td>
<td>Elem. ed; Mod. dis.; ELL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Michelle”</td>
<td>5th grade math</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>M.Ed.</td>
<td>Elem. ed; Mod. dis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Liz”</td>
<td>Middle school social studies</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>M.Ed.</td>
<td>History 6-8; ELL; SEI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Maya”</td>
<td>7th grade math</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Receptive</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>M.Ed.</td>
<td>Math 5-12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The handbook for the Robey has articulated the following school mission:

The Robey K-8 School is committed to developing academic excellence in every child. We are a community of scholars. In partnership with families and the community, our staff provides a safe, nurturing learning environment for our children. We value the individuality of each child and strive to empower every student with critical and creative thinking skills. Working in collaboration with one another, our staff models the habits of life-long learning, respect for others, and responsible citizenship that we aim to instill in every Robey student (Ramsey, 2012).

The Robey began implementing SAI as a Cohort 1 school during the 2010-2011 academic year. In the Spring of 2011, the Robey school staff voted to adopt inclusive educational practices beginning in the 2011-2012 academic year, and the school is becoming a fully inclusive school for students with and without disabilities. As of 2013, all of the preschool through fifth grade classrooms were inclusion classrooms. In the sixth through eighth grades, special education teachers provided “push-in” support in English language arts and mathematics classrooms. Eighty percent of the Robey’s students with disabilities were educated in full-sized inclusion classrooms in 2012-13. The Robey is a member of the Wisteron Public School Inclusive Schools Network (WPS ISN), which was launched in the spring of 2011 as a component of SAI. The aim of the WPS ISN was to provide support to
school leaders and teachers from schools that desire to develop and expand their inclusive schooling practices. While Robey leadership was constant through the adoption and initial implementation of SAI, in the spring of 2013, Catherine announced her intention to resign her role as principal.

Participants were asked to describe the Robey community (see Table 4.4).

Table 4.4

*Questions Related to the Robey Community*

- Describe the community the the Robey serves.
- Tell me a little about the students that you teach. Tell me a little about the Robey. Do you enjoy working here?

All participants spoke highly of the Robey, using words like “high-functioning” (Paul), “involved” (Audrey), “well-run” (Paul), “tight-knit” (Janice), and “warm and welcoming” (Jaime, Audrey), with “phenomenal leadership” (Maya). Maya, who had taught in the district for 13 years, elaborated, “Racially it’s the most diverse school I’ve ever worked in. It’s a mix of urban and suburban. We have more family and community involvement in this school than in any other school I’ve ever worked in.” Michelle described her students, “It’s a very varied group because we’re a full inclusion school, so we have people with cognitive delays, people with autism. And then we have some really high-achieving students that perform quite well, quite high.”

**Exploration/Adoption**

**Year 0: 2009-2010.** The exploration phase of reform implementation typically involves an assessment of the potential match between a school’s needs, evidence-based
practices, and school resources in order to make a decision about a particular approach to reform (Fixsen et al., 2005). In 2009, Catherine was in her fourth year as principal of the Robey. During 2009-2010, Catherine and her staff started investigating alternatives to the Student Support Team (SST) model to, in her words, “make more sense” of the process by which students were referred to special education. The SST was intended to be a structure in which teachers brought student concerns for collaborative problem-solving with other colleagues, including specialists such as the school psychologist and speech and language pathologist. Instead, Catherine described the structure as a time when “teachers would come and throw all the problems on the table about some kid they were really worried about and the expectation was that they would get to walk away afterwards and leave it on the table with a bunch of people who were supposed to be doing something about it.” In Catherine’s view, the “doing something about it” part often included an anecdote-based referral for a special education evaluation or a vague plan that did not put the onus on the teachers for changing their instruction to improve the educational progress of their students. She identified an overreliance on anecdotes, an underutilization of quantitative data and a lack of clear action planning as problems with the SST structure, saying, “Even the teachers that were coming and dropping off their problems were like, ‘But nothing changed.’”

Frustration with SST led Catherine and her staff that year to explore alternatives to the structure. The exploration she and her staff did at the school level paralleled the district’s quest for a systemic framework for change. (Table 4.5 displays some of the questions asked of participants related to the exploration and adoption of RTI.) Catherine recalled that her principal intern had a background in RTI and oriented her to the approach. “The concept just made so much sense to me in the way that I was already thinking about data and thinking
about supporting kids that it clicked really quickly I think.’’ Catherine admitted that she questioned how special education actually changed things for kids, “Just giving kids a disability, a diagnosis, an IEP – those don’t do anything. You don’t need those things to do something differently for kids, you know. I’m not anti-IEPs, but we don’t wait for an IEP to do something different for a kid who needs something different.”

In the summer of 2010, when Catherine received an email from the district’s assistant superintendent of special education announcing SAI – which she read as being RTI – she immediately signed the Robey on as part of the first cohort. She attended the August 2010 SAI Orientation for Cohort 1 principals and quickly got to work developing a plan for implementation at the Robey.

Table 4.5

Questions Related to the Adoption of RTI

- How did RTI implementation happen here?
- What was your background or understanding of RTI before the Robey started implementing RTI? In other words, did you have any prior knowledge of the RTI model?
- How much input did classroom teachers have in the decision to adopt RTI?
- What was teachers’ initial reaction to RTI?

Of the eight educators who participated in this study, three of them worked at the Robey during the 2009-10 school year: Catherine, Audrey and Maya. Interestingly, although Catherine stated that she and her staff had together identified RTI as an alternative to SST, the data analysis revealed that Catherine owned most of the Robey’s decision to adopt the SAI framework. Maya and Audrey could not quite recall the process by which the decision to
adopt RTI was made. Audrey said, “I know the ILT (instructional leadership team) had discussions about it.” All participants had the sense that staff were consulted but that it was ultimately Catherine’s decision to move forward with adopting the model. Paul explained, “I think everyone had input, but I don’t think it was ever a question of whether it was going to be implemented. The question was, ‘how will it look? Not, are we having it?’”

**Implementation/Innovation**

Fixsen et al. (2005) have suggested that after a decision is made to begin implementation, certain “installation” activities need to take place, including the development of human resource strategies, structural supports and outcome expectations (p. 16). After deciding to adopt SAI, the development and implementation of key infrastructures began quickly and continued in a recursive process throughout the next three years. In other words, although Catherine brought the framework on board in 2010, throughout each year, groups of staff adapted, innovated and co-constructed the framework in various ways to meet the particular needs and resource limitations of the school and specific grade levels. “Installation”, then, wasn’t a discrete stage of the process but rather occurred simultaneously as the initial implementation got underway. Table 4.6 displays some of the questions asked of participants related to the implementation of RTI.

Table 4.6

*Questions Related to the Implementation of RTI*

- How did RTI implementation happen here?
- Describe what was done (a) initially and (b) an ongoing basis to prepare the faculty for the implementation of RTI.
• What professional development was provided around RTI?
• Tell me a little about how the RTI model works here. Describe how the Robey has implemented tiered interventions, team-based structures and assessment as part of RTI.
• What changes has the Robey school made to facilitate the implementation of this model?
• What changes have you made in your classroom to facilitate implementation of the model?
• Describe some of the feelings you have had during the implementation of RTI.

The principal, Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), grade level teams and individual teachers were separately and together significant mediators of the implementation process as it evolved from 2010-2013. Table 4.7 depicts a year-by-year sequence of the Robey’s implementation of RTI, including key decisions and how they were made.

Table 4.7

Key Implementation Decisions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of RTI</th>
<th>Year 1: 2010-11</th>
<th>Year 2: 2011-12</th>
<th>Year 3: 2012-13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RTI meeting structure/focus</td>
<td>Initial implementation</td>
<td>Full implementation/Innovation</td>
<td>Innovation/Drift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• ILT was established and met monthly for 75 minutes. (P)</td>
<td>• ILT was established and met monthly for 75 minutes. (P, I)</td>
<td>• ILT met about every other month for 75 minutes. (P)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focus was on establishing RTI definitions, infrastructures and practices. (I)</td>
<td>• Focus was on refining RTI infrastructures and practices. (I)</td>
<td>• External consultant at most ILT meetings. (P, D)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• External consultant at all ILT meetings. (P, D)</td>
<td>• External consultant at all ILT meetings. (P, D)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- Established a Special Education Referral Team (a team to review referrals as they arise) (P)

- Cross-grade-level SITs (gr k-2, 3-5, 6-8) met during after-school PD hours for 90 minutes once every 4-6 weeks. (P, I)
- Focus was one student discussed holistically. (P, I)
- Developed a timed problem-solving protocol to guide discussions (P, I)

- SITs occurred during grade-level common planning time, twice per month for 40 minutes. Focus was on skill needs of several students (G, I, P)
- SIT agenda emerged from student data (D, I)
- Adopted the district problem-solving protocol to guide discussions; added timed component (I)

- Middle school met once or twice this year (G)
- Fifth grade met weekly (G)
- Other grades met every 2-3 weeks (G)
- Each team used a different adaptation of the problem-solving protocol with a focus on data-based problem solving; middle school not using a protocol (G)

### Materials

- Principal created meeting protocols, letters to parents, meeting agenda templates and follow-up protocols (P)
- Principal allocated funds for grade-level teams to purchase interventions in Spring 2011 (I, P)
- Principal intern coordinated all of the materials necessary for screening and progress monitoring all students. (P)
- Principal intern created a DropBox for all staff to access documents and data related to RTI, including intervention scripts. (P)
- Developed a data tracking system (P)

- Teams have adapted RPSPM protocol a lot to meet team needs (G)
- Conducted an inventory of school-wide assessments, interventions and instructional delivery formats, further broken down by grade level (I)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fidelity of implementation</th>
<th>Selection and use of screening tools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Principal attended all SIT meetings. (P)</td>
<td>- Universal screening guidance established for all grades for ELA and math, including criteria for determining which students needed tiered support. (I)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ILT completed a self-assessment of problem-solving implementation to monitor school-level RTI implementation (D, P)</td>
<td>- Universal screening and progress monitoring schedule established for all grades for ELA and math, including criteria for determining which students needed tiered support. (G)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Principal attended many SIT meetings and regularly requested documentation of SIT problem-solving activities. (P)</td>
<td>- Decided not to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ILT completed a self-assessment of problem-solving implementation to monitor school-level RTI implementation (D, I)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Principal did not attend SIT meetings and did not request documentation of SIT activities. Handed responsibility to grade-level teams (G)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ILT completed a self-assessment of problem-solving implementation to monitor school-level RTI implementation (D, P)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higgins Averill 112</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Year 1: 2010-11. After officially signing on as part of the first SAI cohort in August 2010, Catherine made some early decisions around the Robey’s implementation of SAI/RTI that set it apart from the district’s model. First, she decided not to adopt the district’s name, “SAI,” choosing from the outset to call the Robey model “RTI.” For Catherine, RTI was a
framework for organizing instruction and assessment and for better understanding students’ challenges in order to inform teaching. She felt “the idea of naming it SAI was just wacky” because she believed it would lead to the perception of being “another ‘thing’ that took the ownership off schools to really understand what it was and to do it themselves.” Catherine understood the theory underlying RTI, and she wanted it to become an engrained part of the way teachers worked and thought about their instructional delivery.

Catherine’s initial vision of how RTI would be operationalized differed from the way it is traditionally implemented. Guldbrandsson (2008) has noted the distinction between “diffusion” and “dissemination” of information. Diffusion is a process by which information travels through certain channels over time via the members of a social system. At this point, buzz about SAI/RTI was developing in the district; in other words, diffusion was occurring. Dissemination, however, refers to a more a deliberate and active process designed to increase the level and rate of adoption of an initiative beyond what might be achieved through diffusion alone (Guldbrandsson, 2008). Participants described gaps in the dissemination of tools and training relevant to supporting implementation.

Although the district had announced SAI, explicitly linked it to the RTI framework, and held an orientation for school leaders in August of 2010 (i.e., diffusion), materials and protocols to support implementation were not available until two months later, and even then there were pieces missing. For instance, I was not assigned as an external consultant to the Robey until October of 2010 and at that point the district had not issued any systemic guidance about essential components of the model (e.g., particular assessments to use for universal screening). So Catherine got started on her own. She explained, “The first year we kind of did our own mushy model. I remember there weren’t any materials put together (from
the district). I wanted to start in September and so we started with something in September that made sense to us that was almost like a hybrid between SST and RTI.” As a result, before the district released the SAI Implementation Guidebook in October of 2010, Catherine had already established the Instructional Leadership Team that she believed would guide the work. She used an application process to recruit representation from every grade level – these individuals would become the facilitators of the Student Intervention Team meetings at their grade levels. “Most teams kind of internally decided who was going to apply from their team.” As is the case in many urban districts where teacher contracts hinder reform efforts (Hess, 1999), Catherine feared the possibility of work-to-rule and she decided to stipend teachers for their participation on the Instructional Leadership Team, saying, “I made sure it was going to happen.” By late September of 2010, Catherine had facilitated this group in developing Student Intervention Team problem-solving meeting protocols, letters to parents, Student Intervention Team agendas and follow-up protocols. She was determined to get implementation of the framework underway.

Catherine decided to use after-school professional development hours for Student Intervention Team meetings. During that first year, Student Intervention Teams were comprised of several grade levels (K-2, 3-5, 6-8); each team met monthly for 90 minutes and discussed one student, referred by a teacher, whose case was presented holistically. The Student Intervention Teams were tasked with developing norms for their meetings and with using the problem-solving protocol to guide their discussion of student learning. The problem-solving protocol was timed and delineated how many minutes a person could talk about the student’s background, data related to the area of concern, action plan development, etc.
Of this first year of implementation, Catherine acknowledged, “We didn’t have the universal data thing all worked out. We didn’t have the tiers all worked out. But we were having more data-based conversations. We were using a timed protocol for the first time, that the ILT had created.” Further, some staff did not feel ready for the change and thus initially resisted it. In his book, *The Human Side of School Change*, Evans (2001) has argued that it is natural for people to resist change, particularly when it is foisted upon them by others. Indeed, Michelle recalled, “It felt like we were doing something that we’d had no direction to do. I cried twice. I think people felt very, like, in a boat with no paddle.”

Despite resistance from some staff, Catherine persisted in developing the model, with her interest in more effectively using data undergirding the process. Audrey elaborated, “I think Catherine did a great job of saying, let’s look at this again and refocusing us back. To keep looking at the data. Where’s the evidence of that. What are you seeing, and things like that. It made teachers really look at the results of the testing and where kids were and think about the students. And also to decide which students are academically low as opposed to a student with a learning disability.” Catherine acknowledged her significant role in getting the RTI infrastructure established and in developing consensus and understanding. “I did a lot of modeling at common planning time. I was at every (grade-level) common planning time. And definitely every Student Intervention Team meeting. And for awhile I was modeling the facilitation or I was co-teaching the (Student Intervention Team meeting) facilitation with the ILT member until I was pretty sure that the ILT member could run it independently.”

By early 2011, Catherine began to realize that the Robey’s RTI framework might be more productive if it were more closely aligned with the district’s conception of SAI, which suggested weekly (instead of monthly) Student Intervention Team meetings in order to
problem-solve around a greater number of students. However, teachers were experiencing momentum with the new process and felt invested as they started collaborating around students’ concerns. Maya recalled, “I remember spending many hours at PD actually following the protocol properly and going through the exact times and discussing the student and allowing other people to have input. And that felt like, wow, this is going to be a productive thing. I can see this format really helping kids.” Participants indicated that Catherine’s presence at every meeting served as an implicit accountability measure and supported fidelity of implementation: Teachers followed the protocol. But not everyone shared Maya’s feelings. Liz, a history teacher, found the protocol “very formulaic. I felt like every time we got to the meat of a discussion, it was sort of squash-, not squashed because we needed to stop talking about it, but we ran out of time. And we needed to finish (filling out) this paper so…” For Liz, the completion of the documentation felt like a chore that stalled substantive conversation. Maya noted another downside to the approach that year: “The problem (with the protocol and infrequent meeting times) was it was limited in how many kids you actually got to talk about.” With teachers’ reactions in mind, Catherine decided to slowly and thoughtfully introduce the traditional RTI model through professional development presented to the Instructional Leadership Team.

In March 2011, the Instructional Leadership Team completed a Self-Assessment of Problem Solving Implementation (SAPSI), a tool recommended by the district to monitor the progress and integrity of SAI/RTI implementation in a school. The tool was intended to a) identify which aspects of the SAI/RTI model have been implemented and the level of fidelity of implementation, and b) help teams develop short- and long-term action steps to support ongoing implementation. The SAPSI queried about critical components of RTI, including the
use of universal screening procedures to identify students needing intervention and the fidelity with which research-based interventions were being delivered. Instructional Leadership Team members were asked to use the following scale to rate the school’s progress on each item comprising the SAPSI:

- 0=Not in progress (Activity occurs 0% of the time)
- 1=Emerging (Activity occurs less than 25% of the time)
- 2=In Progress (Activity occurs 25% to 74% of the time)
- 3=Achieved (Activity occurs 75% to 100% of the time)
- 4=Maintaining (Activity was rated as achieved last time and continues to occur 75% to 100% of the time)

While the Robey had initiated some components of RTI—for example, using data when discussing student concerns—they had not yet fully attended to other essential features. Completion of this tool helped the Instructional Leadership Team think more broadly about the RTI framework and identify areas that needed improvement.

During the Spring of 2011, Catherine engaged me as the external consultant to conduct a series of professional development sessions with the Instructional Leadership Team. As such, I brought the district’s guidance on topics such as the use of data to prioritize concerns; an overview of the RTI framework; the definition of intervention and distinguishing characteristics across Tiers 1, 2, and 3; and the collaborative problem-solving process, though I was unable to tell them which interventions or assessments to use specifically, as the district had not delineated this. After all of this professional learning which occurred through the Spring of 2011, Catherine suggested to the Instructional Leadership Team that during the 2011-2012 academic year, the Robey would move toward
the more traditional RTI model and thus align more closely with the district’s conception of SAI. In other words, rather than meeting monthly in cross-grade-level configurations, the Student Intervention Teams would meet more frequently as grade levels. The agenda for these meetings would be emerge directly from universal screening data about students’ skills, as opposed to teachers referring particular students to be presented – sometimes without any data to support the referral. The Instructional Leadership Team members agreed with this suggestion and began planning action steps to make it occur.

Throughout this first year of implementation, teachers had started identifying and accumulating evidence-based interventions, but the facilitators realized that there were still some needs for materials and resources to support effective delivery of interventions. Jaime noted a related struggle for teachers who did not have the benefit of being on the Instructional Leadership Team, “Some of the frustrations were, well, what is an intervention? What does it look like?” Michelle agreed, “I brought up a kid and he clearly had an ELA strength and in math some sort of big discrepancy, I knew he needed help and I needed to help him, and people would shout out ‘beans in a cup’ and I’m like, that’s not a strategy, those are food and things, like… I feel like we were unclear about intervention.” Catherine knew that work needed to continue around developing teachers’ understanding of critical terms, but she wanted to put resources into teachers’ hands. In the Spring of 2011, Catherine allocated funds to each grade-level team to purchase materials to support ongoing intervention, giving them the autonomy to research and choose intervention programs and materials. She recalled this as significant in increasing teacher buy-in, “You’re going to tell

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6 Beans in a cup refers to a math activity in which students use a cup of beans to find ratios to express the number of marked beans in the cup compared to the total number of beans in the cup.
me you don’t have what you need to do this? Well, we have money for you to buy what you
need to do this. So figure out what you need.”

Contemporaneous to the work and decision-making around RTI implementation,
another big change was underway. In the Spring of 2011, the Robey school staff voted to
begin the transition to becoming a full inclusion school starting in the 2011-2012 academic
year. Catherine felt the philosophy of inclusion went hand in hand with RTI, “Every kid is
everyone’s responsibility and nothing’s actually going to change for a kid unless we do
something different for them.” For her, that “something different” was a shared responsibility
for student challenge and success in the general education classroom, so that all students
benefit from increased support.

**Year 2: 2011-12.** The summer between the first and second year of implementation
involved a tremendous amount of planning, adaptation and coordination. During the Summer
of 2011, Catherine and a group of the Robey’s teacher leaders, including some members of
the previous year’s Instructional Leadership Team and several new staff who would become
members of that team, held numerous multi-hour planning sessions to prepare for rollout of
the traditional RTI framework in light of the move to full inclusion. The goals of these
planning sessions were to develop (a) consensus around universal screening measures, (b) a
timeline for conducting universal screening, (c) decision rules for determining which students
needed support, (d) a progress monitoring schedule, (e) data management procedures and (f)
a plan for how to logistically best provide intervention.

Using their experiences from the prior year and their new understandings about the
critical components of RTI, the group began by inventorying their existing assessment
practices in an attempt to establish clear guidance around universal screening and progress
monitoring for all grades in both English Language Arts (ELA) and math. After deliberation about the merits of various assessments, they identified a multi-gated universal screening approach for ELA that utilized a combination of data from several assessments (e.g., the Achievement Network interim assessments, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills [DIBELS], the Developmental Reading Assessment [DRA], the Qualitative Reading Inventory [QRI]) to guide decisions about the need for Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions.

Decision rule criteria—that is, cut scores for identifying students needing intervention—were defined for each grade level. Because the district had few options for math screening measures, the group decided to create an assessment of basic math skills from grades K-8. The group also developed decision rules for the math screener. After determining universal screeners and related decision criteria, the group identified progress monitoring practices for each grade level in ELA and math.

The Instructional Leadership Team explored some of the district-developed SAI documents, including a problem-solving protocol for conducting Student Intervention Team meetings. They merged elements of their protocol with the district’s protocol, creating an updated discussion protocol and recording sheet for problem solving. Notably, this updated version was soon adopted by the district and distributed for use at Student Intervention Team meetings at all SAI schools throughout the district. Co-construction of RTI was occurring within the school and between the school and the district.

Catherine and Paul rearranged the master schedule to make sure that people would have time to meet as grade levels and would have time to effectively deliver interventions. They created an intervention block, called enrichment block or “E-Block,” in the middle school schedule during which both remedial and enrichment interventions would occur.
During E-Block, which occurred for 30 minutes three times per week at the beginning of the school day, all middle school students were regrouped for intervention or enrichment. It was intended to be an “all hands on deck” approach, meaning that all available building personnel (e.g., school psychologist, interns, para-professionals, speech and language pathologist) would help with delivering interventions. Catherine allowed elementary level teams to work within their own schedules to plan intervention blocks. Further, responding to feedback from teachers and the Instructional Leadership Team, Catherine allocated time for the Student Intervention Team meetings to occur bi-weekly during grade-level common planning time as opposed to monthly during after-school PD hours.

Alongside all of this work, Catherine and the Instructional Leadership Team planned for the transition to full inclusion, which would begin in grades P-5 with the intention of expanding to the middle school in future years. The school staff voted on the full inclusion model with the understanding that at each grade level, six seats would be reserved for students with moderate to severe disabilities. This shift in practice meant implementing other structural changes that aligned with the work of RTI implementation, including a teaming model of staffing to support all students (see Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2. Teaming model of staffing (Source: Robey K-8 school website)
This teaming model was also intended to facilitate the delivery of differentiated Tier 1/Core instruction and Tier 2 and 3 interventions in the general classroom because, theoretically, more staff would be available.

The Instructional Leadership Team decided to eliminate the SST structure, which had remained in place during the first year of RTI implementation. They hoped that the improved Student Intervention Team structure would supplant the need for a regularly occurring SST meeting. In its place, they established a Special Education Team, which was comprised of faculty trained in looking at student data (e.g., school psychologist, special educator, administrator). The charge of this team, which met as needed, was to review information on referrals to ensure that the student had received an appropriate level of intervention prior to receiving a psycho-educational evaluation. In the absence of guidance from the district around the intersection of RTI and special education referrals, Catherine and the Instructional Leadership Team determined some general guidelines for staff. They suggested that students should be referred only after receiving 12 weeks of intervention with one or two intervention changes and fidelity to both core/Tier 1 instruction and to delivery of the intervention. If after this time and effort, a student has made little to no progress, then teachers could submit the student’s name to the Special Education Team for consideration for referral for evaluation.

Much of the other work prior to beginning the 2011-2012 academic year entailed the development and coordination of all of the materials necessary for the screening and progress monitoring of all students. In the district, the use of DIBELS was mandatory for grades K-2 and teachers of those grades could enter scores electronically via a mobile device, but other grade levels did not have this technology support. Prior to the start of the year, Catherine’s principal intern downloaded, printed and organized copies of the DIBELS universal
screening and progress monitoring passages for grades 3-5. Additionally, the intern created a web-based DropBox for all staff to access documents and data related to RTI, including a data tracking spreadsheet for all students receiving Tier 2 and 3 support.

In September of 2011, Catherine was ready to present the “new” RTI model to the whole staff. She and I co-developed a professional development session that we first discussed with the Instructional Leadership Team for feedback and then presented to all staff in an afterschool meeting. This presentation provided explicit guidance around screening and meeting processes, Student Intervention Team members’ roles and responsibilities, use of data, provision of interventions and the role of the Special Education Team.

Janice, who was an experienced teacher but new to the Robey that year as a middle school special educator, was tasked with helping with the administration of the universal screenings. “Basically it seemed like I DIBELS-ed the whole month of September. I gave the DIBELS and then the QRI. We used that data to determine the groupings.” She followed the intervention and progress monitoring schedule which had been outlined by the Instructional Leadership Team and which was monitored closely by Catherine. “We knew we had to do it (the intervention) three times a week, we also looked at the data, we said ‘ok what does this kid need’, we talked about the individual students. We did it every week. You had to bring your data because you had to send Catherine an email saying what you did.” Accountability structures remained firmly in place. Janice admitted that despite her initial skepticism she became more invested, “I could see the (student) growth. I get excited when I see growth.” Her attitude shifted when her new practices started yielding results. Michelle had a similar reaction, “We ran it much differently (than the prior year). Like we just met fifth grade. We definitely cycled through kids more efficiently.”
By January, the major revised systems had been put in place and emphasis turned to continuous improvement of the RTI model and its alignment with inclusion for the remainder of the year. The focus of the Instructional Leadership Team went to improving the RTI system within the building. Student Intervention Teams, facilitated by members of the Instructional Leadership Team, focused on individual student challenges as identified by data. Catherine continued to attend most meetings and requested that all teams submit documentation of the problem-solving process (i.e., completed copies of the Student Intervention Team problem-solving record).

In March of 2012, the Instructional Leadership Team again completed the SAPSI to monitor the progress and integrity of RTI implementation. This exercise helped the Instructional Leadership Team identify areas that needed refinement, including the need to identify progress monitoring tools that better reflected the skill area which was receiving intervention. Teachers were also struggling with using their common planning time for Student Intervention Team meetings. They found it hard to balance setting aside time for the data-based problem-solving meetings with time need for planning and reflection about Core curriculum. As a result, fidelity of implementation of Student Intervention Team meeting times and processes varied across grade levels. With E-Block occurring at the beginning of the day, some students would arrive late and miss their intervention time. Further, even though middle school had been using the E-Block with an “all hands on deck” approach, teachers were finding that they needed more staff so that intervention groups would be small enough to be targeted and strategic. Maya recounted,

In the beginning it was absolutely just a mess of kids being thrown in and so the different skills that were in the room or the different abilities even was such a wide
range. I had 17 kids in a 20-minute period. And it was even multi-grade. That was our Tier 2. I don’t know how many kids actually got anything because it was literally five different groups and running around trying to put a fire out at every spot. ‘Ok, so you guys don’t know how to divide, you never learned how to divide. Let me teach you how to divide.’

She had to adapt her approach as the year went on,

In the second round, because we do two rounds a year, I had only 8th grade. And we realized targeting a specific skill wasn’t necessarily going to help them as much as targeting the objective that was really more open response-based. Helping them develop problem-solving strategies for open response questions. And that particular group of kids did really do pretty well. We did see a good amount of growth with them. So that worked a little bit better.

At elementary school, grade levels had more staff due to the inclusion model, but that also raised some challenges. Audrey described the first part of that year,

I think the letting go of a group of students for someone else to do the intervention with was a little challenging because as someone who’s been teaching and having full control for like 20-plus years, you’re like, ‘Oh my goodness, no, what’s that student doing? I need to know.’

Jaime described another challenge that went hand-in-hand with the move to full inclusion,

I think sometimes in an inclusion setting if you have such needy kids, they tend to be the ones that in the Tier 3 interventions, so sometimes I feel like those kids that are middle of the road don’t get the interventions that they need because the significant need is with the inclusion kids.
With that in mind, her team began thinking about how to use resources to intervene on other students who were not on IEPs. The following year, they adjusted their practice to incorporate more flexible groupings that included children with and without disabilities.

Shifts in both attitudes and practices were occurring as teachers operationalized the philosophy of inclusion and the RTI framework in their grade-level contexts. Catherine’s trust in teachers’ expertise was evident in the autonomy she provided in letting them figure out how it would all work. But at the same time, she continued that year to provide a lot of oversight of practices, saying, “I was still there to poke and prod or pull them back to the protocol.” She knew what was working and what still needed work.

Innovation/Drift

**Year 3: 2012-2013.** The third year of the implementation was characterized by further adaptation and innovation, resulting in some cases in quite a bit of deviation from the model. Adaptation refers to the changes teachers make to materials and routines associated with the implementation effort in order to fit their particular needs in the classroom (O’Donnell, 2008). When associated with capacity building and sustainability, these types of adaptations can be purposeful and even essential (Burns et al., 2013; Honig & Hatch, 2004). In contrast, drift refers to adaptations that deviate from the model version of a reform, wherein some components of the model are replaced or significantly altered (Domitrovich et al., 2008).

Despite variations in implementation across grade levels, by year three, conceptual consistency existed in terms of implementation of the majority of the critical components of RTI at the elementary school grade levels. In other words, despite differences in grade-level variables, such as the interventions offered, the personnel utilized, and the universal
screening and progress monitoring procedures selected, a response-to-intervention framework was being implemented with consistency at the elementary school grades. While the procedures differed, the general idea was that students who were not making adequate progress would move within the multi-tiered system so that they received more intense instruction. Middle school participants still struggled to resolve technical issues that hindered their ability to collaboratively problem solve.

In planning for the third year of implementation, Paul and Catherine decided to move the E-block to the middle of the day, in an attempt to address ongoing challenges with buses arriving late for school. Otherwise, existing systems and structures for assessment, Student Intervention Team meetings and intervention delivery remained in place. Adjustments were primarily the responsibility of grade-level teams. As Catherine described, “The grade-level teams sort of owns everything going on with their kids.” With that noted, the third year of implementation was characterized by markedly less oversight by Catherine. Audrey explained, “I feel like now it’s not only that she’s trusting us, I think she’s also pulled back in a way.” Further, while the Instructional Leadership Team continued to meet monthly, their focus during the first half of the year shifted to refining aspects of the team teaching approach as the full inclusion model was being scaled up. Domitrovich et al. (2008) have suggested that in implementation endeavors, the process of monitoring the quality of implementation is often overlooked, or given lower priority than measuring outcomes. Without such monitoring, “drift”, or deviation from the “model” version of the practice, can occur. While the work of inclusion aligned with the work of RTI, the Instructional Leadership Team spent less time monitoring and discussing RTI infrastructures and practices specifically. In this way, staff had more opportunity to expand and innovate and, in some
cases, drift from the practices they had established in prior years.

Jaime explained how her second grade team had adapted the screenings and assessments to make them more useful,

Assessments are just so broad and so, they don’t get to the heart of the matter. This year one of the things that came out of our, um, our initial screening was that addition facts weren’t, at like, the kids didn’t know addition, didn’t know subtraction, so we kind of created our own like fluency screenings and things like that to see if it was just us or if it was the other things in the assessment, so we’ve been good about that in math.

At the third grade, Audrey’s team had internalized the structures and processes of RTI to inform instruction in the moment. She explained,

Now it’s just a part of the way we work. So that’s great because we know what we need to do. We know the results. We can look at the results of the test and say gee, wait a minute. We did teach the fractions, and why didn’t they get this piece. And why did a third of the class not do successfully? So go back and look at it and we throw it back and forth and we do our numbers talk or whatever little 10-minute math we do to address it again. So it’s good because it’s not being directed, but we’re utilizing it to get things done.

By the 2012-2013 school year, using data to inform instruction had become part of the normative behavior of Audrey’s third grade team. Like Jaime, she felt autonomy to choose assessments that made data analysis more meaningful. At other grade levels, RTI practices lost momentum. Challenges to fidelity popped up and went unresolved. Maya admitted, “I know at the middle school level we’ve gotten far off.”
In early 2013, Catherine announced her intention to resign as principal at the end of the school year. She began developing a succession plan that would sustain the efforts around both inclusion and RTI. While during the first part of the academic year the Instructional Leadership Team addressed issues related to inclusive teaching practices, toward the end of the year, the focus shifted back to RTI. In March of 2013, the Instructional Leadership Team completed the SAPSI to monitor the progress and integrity of RTI implementation. Catherine framed it in the context of sustainability, “We want to do a self-assessment of where we are with RTI implementation right now so we can talk about what we need to do to keep it rolling strong in the fall. So it doesn’t die.” As a reminder, on the SAPSI, Instructional Leadership Team members were asked to rate each item using the following scale: 0=not in progress (activity occurs 0% of the time); 1= emerging (activity occurs less than 25% of the time); 2=in progress (activity occurs 25% to 74% of the time); 3=achieved (activity occurs 75% to 100% of the time); and 4=maintaining (activity was rated as achieved last time and continues to occur 75% to 100% of the time). The exercise stimulated much conversation about current RTI practices and structures, and the Instructional Leadership Team began to realize that significant adaptations and deviations had occurred at grade-level teams. The following excerpt provides one example, highlighting the variability of progress monitoring practices across the school:

Orla: Okay, how about progress monitoring data? Using progress monitoring data on a regular, frequent basis to monitor students’ responsiveness to interventions.

Fifth grade teacher: Well, it’s been individual for each team.

Kindergarten teacher: (Nods). Yeah.
Catherine: So then maybe for each team quickly. I’m curious if we do a whip around and you give your team a one, two, three, or four.

Fifth grade teacher: I’d say four, it’s killing us but we’re doing it.

Orla: Ok.

Catherine: And it’s okay if your answer is lower for your team.

Maya: I would not say four.

Orla: That’s ok. We want to identify where we...

Maya: It’s not a zero but.

Janice: When I think about it, I’m thinking about what we just did in terms of grouping, how we just had to change all of our groups for middle school for ELA or math, so we did look at that data. So that’s.

Orla: That’s universal, right.

Janice: Mhm.

Catherine: Cause that was the midyear universal screening.

Orla: Yeah.

Maya: (Clarifying) This was our progress monitoring, on like, what intervention we’re doing.

Fourth grade teacher: Right.

Catherine: Like on a two-week basis, are you collecting DIBELS data?

Fourth grade teacher: Umm..

First grade teacher: I am to see if kids are making progress. I have to because it’s part of my…

Orla: Yeah. I think at the lower grades it’s mandated through the district. But
then at the upper grades. You know, it really seems to be variable.

Catherine: So variability maybe on progress monitoring.

Orla: Yeah.

Maya: One. I would say one.

Catherine: That’s good. This will help us know what we need to work on making more consistent...

Janice: I wouldn’t say one for us. I would say definitely at least two for the progress monitoring.

Orla: Mhm.

Janice: Cause we did a lot of progress monitoring.

Fourth grade teacher: I would say two.

Catherine: Maybe middle school depending on the group it’s…

Janice: Yeah.

Maya: Yeah. It does vary because we don’t even have a lot of cross conversations with the math because we’re all doing different things and.

Orla: Mhm. Ok.

Catherine: There are other teams...

First grade teacher: Yeah. We’re at a three. Um. There are friends whom we’ve had to um, develop a different form of a progress monitoring other than a DIBELS because of their IEPs because they’re so low and they’re not…

Orla: Right.

First grade teacher: And so um. You know, we had to get creative.
Higgins Averill

Catherine: Yeah. But you’re doing it? With fidelity?

First grade teacher: Yes.

Grade-level teams had veered in different directions in their use of progress monitoring tools. While some teams got creative and developed assessments that would reach students who struggled to access traditional progress monitoring tools, other teams were no longer collecting progress monitoring data at all. Similar diversions of practices were evident in other areas, as well. When the topic turned to the documentation of intervention plans for students, waning fidelity and variability in practices were apparent:

Fourth grade teacher: I think we did like, we have for every student last year,

but we’ve had other things on the agenda for our, we haven’t done it as often
as we did last year.

Catherine: So the documentation has not been happening with as much

fidelity?

Fourth grade teacher: As often. Right.

Catherine: And some teams are using different forms of documentation. Is that

what you’re saying?

Fifth grade teacher: Yeah.

After this exercise, the Instructional Leadership Team decided they needed to refresh their own understanding of the original RTI/SAI model. They asked me to present a brief overview of the critical components of RTI, with the hope that this would help them think about systematizing aspects of the model that had fallen off course. In April 2013, I presented the same slideshow that I had used when I initially came on as an external consultant in the Fall of 2010. This “refresher” caused Instructional Leadership Team
members to realize that all teams had drifted somewhat from the “blueprint” of RTI. Some grade-level teams had deviated significantly and had not retained some core components (e.g., Student Intervention Team meetings, progress monitoring), while other teams had adapted the core components to better fit the context of their grade levels. A fifth grade teacher provided an example of the latter, and she described for the Instructional Leadership Team how she and her grade-level colleagues had evolved the Student Intervention Team meeting structure and protocol over time:

What happened was the year before last (2010-11) is that we had a group of kids that we realized by February actually needed to be retained. We had had no conversations about it before. All of a sudden it was like ‘Oh my God, how did we miss this?’ We should’ve known. But we didn’t have the time, the hands, the bodies, to give everyone like the benchmark. Like everything else, you learn the hard way. We started a weekly check-in that started off as the thumbs up, like academic and behavior. And then we realized that that’s just not enough. So now we do a weekly check in where we go through our class lists, so approximately 40 kids. So basically we look at the last major assessment, if it’s a selection test or a unit test in math, and we report that and then if there are any other changes. If there have been any phone calls during the week, if they got maybe an award, you know, for a scholarship award. We talk about homework, what grades we’re putting in. Six out of six homework. Two reading responses average. And any changes in behavior. And to keep it moving we just note if there’s a change with behavior, positive or negative. You know, it’s just like notes so we can all look back. And this is a common binder we keep in the middle of the two rooms. So then you know if someone had a bad day
in math, and you want to call home. You could see, well, Maggie just called at lunch about ELA, maybe I should do that for you know, a real one-two punch. Or maybe this isn’t the day to call. We know what we’re all doing.

She outlined for the Instructional Leadership Team the many ways in which the fifth grade team had adapted the RTI structures that Catherine had initially presented. But rather than being undesirable drifts, these innovations and adaptations represented the way the team responded to its own unique context and culture.

Audrey noted that the original model did not account for the move to full inclusion and the behavioral challenges presented by some students with moderate to severe disabilities, saying,

I just was thinking how we were talking about the models that you represented is academically when you’re talking the math, you’re talking ELA, but when you deal with a behavioral issue that can throw off all of it. And that’s the piece I think that to me has been the biggest challenge. It is that yes, we’re working and we’re giving a group and children that are getting you know the lower tier, the higher tier, and I’m grabbing that middle group, but I’m now dealing with the behavior and that middle group and that’s where that body, that body is so crucial. I mean, everybody’s hands on, but we’re just getting a groove of okay, you handle it, I’ll stay with the group. But then, I mean, at one point I looked up and there’s three adults, they’re trying to just intervene on one child. And then I’m like, you know, that’s crazy. So that’s the tricky part.

Teachers struggled with maintaining fidelity of core RTI components when challenges arose that seemed beyond their control. It was difficult to adhere to specified practices for problem-
solving documentation, meeting times and intervention delivery when each team’s situation was unique and changed with the needs of each student who enrolled. As the Instructional Leadership Team considered how to move forward into the following academic year, knowing that a new principal would be in place, the fifth grade teacher offered,

Do we want like a standard like formulaic, or are we comfortable, just like, knowing the purpose of RTI? And then from there… As long as the goals are, check in frequently. The higher the need, the more often the check in. Have a plan. When are you going to, how often, and how, and what are you going to look for. If you just for yourselves, not to you know, and even accountability for everyone else. If you use this theory, and you have a plan, then…

The rest of the team nodded in agreement:

Maya: That should be the plan. And the plan’s different at each level.

Janice: Yeah, that’s what I think too.

Fifth grade teacher: The goal is the same.

Maya: Right.

Fifth grade teacher: That you check in often and you check in more frequently with the neediest and needier. And that you know you have like a time, like we’re going to try this for this many weeks. We’re going to test at the end of cycle one, cycle two, cycle three.

Here the Instructional Leadership Team wanted to achieve conceptual consistency across all grade levels, including middle school, in how they implemented the critical components of RTI. While the procedures may differ, the fifth grade teacher suggested that the general idea is that students who are not making adequate progress are monitored more
frequently and receive time-specific action plans for intensive instruction. To operationalize this plan at the grade-level teams, the Instructional Leadership Team decided to ask the incoming principal for professional development time during August to discuss how to implement structures in a way that better accounted for the context of their level. They further decided to conduct a refresher for the whole faculty so that all staff, including new staff, could revive their understanding of the RTI system and how it aligned with the inclusion model.

The self-assessment and RTI refresher had helped members of the Instructional Leadership Team become aware of the many factors that shaped their RTI practices. Under Catherine’s guidance, during the balance of 2013, the Instructional Leadership Team turned its attention back to revision of RTI systems, committed at this point to adjusting the framework without compromising its functional and foundational components.

**Interpretive Summary**

While it is clear that the Robey’s RTI implementation was influenced by many factors, which will be presented in greater detail in chapter five, in this chapter, I presented the chronology of the RTI implementation process at the Robey with a focus on decision-making. Data analysis revealed that while Catherine and her staff were exploring alternatives to an ineffective SST structure at the school level, the district was contemporaneously seeking a systemic framework for change. As such, the decision to adopt RTI at the Robey resulted in part from the district’s adoption of the framework as a reform mechanism, consistent with research that has demonstrated that even when teachers are ostensibly given a voice in choosing a reform approach, their voices tend to be “overshadowed by more powerful voices at the top” (Datnow et al., 2002, p. 35). However, keeping in mind that the
adoption and implementation of RTI at the Robey occurred as part of this larger reform effort, it is notable how much innovation and adaptation occurred right from the outset, evident even in Catherine’s first decision to reject the district-decided name “SAI”. Because the guidance disseminated by the district reflected little attention to how teachers at the Robey, a resource-limited urban school, would actually put the model into practice, innovation and adaptation were necessary to respond to cultural variables and fit unique grade-level contexts.

The Robey was implementing RTI while building the model at the same time. The development of the framework over time relied on its leadership – but the nature of that leadership shifted from year to year. Catherine acted as a key mediator of the adoption of RTI and its initial implementation, providing directives and accountability for establishing school-based infrastructures such as team meeting times, problem-solving protocols, use of data, and implementation of interventions. This supports extant research evidence that a critical aspect of organizational capacity for change is extensive support from the formal leader (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Fixsen et al., 2009; Fixsen et al., 2005). Catherine was a key driver of the Robey’s RTI implementation, by establishing routines, building consensus among staff and monitoring implementation of the components of RTI and its implementation as a whole.

As implementation got underway, the Instructional Leadership Team became instrumental in the continuous refinement of the RTI model. As Catherine explained, “We used the ILT heavily. That was all the ILT did for two years basically, was be the facilitators of this process, troubleshoot it, practice it, talk about it, go back and facilitate it with their teams.” Their investment reflected a sense of accountability. All participants described
Catherine as holding them accountable to specific processes and procedures during the first two years. During 2012-2013, Catherine released responsibility to grade-level teams, and she pulled back in her oversight of fidelity and quality of practices.

It is clear that the implementation was influenced by many factors, and those will be presented in greater detail in chapter five. Strong support and fairly vigilant monitoring by Catherine were not enough to guarantee fidelity of implementation to the model, as some grade-level teams retained and adapted critical components of the model while others waned in their fidelity of implementation. The more nuanced reasons for these responses will be discussed in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONDITIONS INFLUENCING IMPLEMENTATION AND RESPONSES TO IMPLEMENTATION

In chapter four, I presented the major categories of influencers on the Robey’s construction of RTI and associated concepts that resulted from the analytic methods described in chapter three (see Table 5.1 to review these categories) and presented the stages of the Robey’s RTI implementation, including how decision-making occurred at each stage. In this chapter, I attend to (a) the conditions that supported and hindered RTI implementation at the Robey and (b) teachers’ responses to RTI implementation at the Robey. As in the preceding chapter, to provide a link between the data and the resulting concepts, I include questions from the interview protocol that helped to generate participants’ responses.

Table 5.1

*Findings Presented as Major Categories of Influencers on the Construction of RTI*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Categories of Influencers on the Construction of RTI</th>
<th>Associated Concepts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Process of implementation</td>
<td>Co-construction; exploration; adoption; implementation; decision-making; innovation; drift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting/hindering conditions</td>
<td>Co-construction; technical supports and structures; grade-level teams; teachers’ beliefs and practices; school community; leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responses to implementation</td>
<td>Co-construction; focus on students; shared ownership; fidelity of implementation; equity; variations in implementation; student outcomes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Conditions Supporting and Hindering Implementation*

Interviews, observations and document analysis revealed that many factors influenced implementation of RTI at the Robey. I touched on some of them in chapter four, and they will be presented in greater detail throughout this section. Table 5.2 details the conditions
supporting and hindering implementation and provides a brief summary of each of these conditions.

Table 5.2

*Conditions Supporting and Hindering Implementation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Technical structures and supports</td>
<td>Time, personnel resources, meeting protocols and professional development opportunities influenced RTI implementation in varying ways. Features of elementary school allowed elementary grade-level teams to mediate hindering conditions more successfully than their middle school counterparts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Focused school leadership supported RTI implementation. Participants perceived the role of district leadership as minimal in RTI implementation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School community</td>
<td>A collegial school community and culture of high expectations for students supported RTI implementation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ beliefs and practices</td>
<td>Teachers’ beliefs about students’ needs and abilities, self-assessment of practice, and understandings about RTI influenced RTI implementation in varying ways.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.3 presents questions from the interview protocol that helped to generate participants’ responses related to factors influencing the Robey’s RTI implementation.

Table 5.3

*Questions Related to Factors Influencing RTI Implementation*

- What factors have supported RTI implementation? What factors have hindered implementation?
- What other factors have influenced implementation? (e.g., community partners, parents, staff turnover).
• Do you have the resources needed to implement RTI?

• Describe the community the Robey serves.

• Tell me a little about the students that you teach. Tell me a little about the Robey. Do you enjoy working here?

• Do you believe that all students can achieve at grade level if they have enough support?

• Imagine you are on the phone with another teacher whose school is considering implementing RTI. What advice would you give her?

### Technical Structures and Supports

By technical structures and supports, I refer to the infrastructures that are necessary for operation of the RTI framework. Data analysis revealed that technical structures and supports influenced the Robey’s RTI implementation in varying ways. Notably, while some grade levels were unable to resolve hindering conditions, other grade levels were able to work around such conditions. Specifically, the variations in approach reflected differences in level: Structural features of the elementary school (e.g., schedule) facilitated those teams in more successfully mediating hindering conditions than their middle school counterparts, in part because the elementary school schedule provided better opportunities for collaborative problem-solving and because the inclusion model added additional personnel at that level. The following sub-sections present the specific structures and supports that influenced implementation.

**Time.** Almost all participants identified time as a barrier to implementation. By “time,” they referred both to (a) time available during the day for meetings and intervention
delivery and also (b) the effective management of time that was carved out explicitly for instruction.

Jaime described how her second grade team struggled to deliver interventions within the time constraints of the school day:

We have a lot of really needy kids and we have this last year at least more kids diagnosed and on ed plans than we’ve had in the past and it’s just trying to find those times where kids are here to get these interventions has just been so tough. Time management, like that is the biggest struggle we have, like where can we fit in these groups and how can we do it?

Although Jaime’s team acknowledged time as a challenge, they tried to work around it, “This year, we’ve done two groups, a reading group and a math group. And kids have cycled in and out within those groups. But it’s been tough to be focused on specifically what kids need because we just have so little time.” Janice highlighted the additional need for time to plan for interventions, “It’s like, ugh, it’s another planning period. You have to have time to plan for it.” In this way, time played a role both in the scheduling of interventions and in the planning for effective instructional delivery.

At middle school, the E-Block was originally a 30-minute time occurring three times per week for intervention and enrichment. But Paul explained that transition time cut into the 30 minutes, leaving teachers with about 22 minutes of actual instructional time. Further, when Paul and Catherine decided to move E-Block from the morning to the middle of the day during 2012-2013 to address issues with student tardiness, E-Block needed to be divided to accommodate the lunch schedule. So students either had 25 minutes of E-Block and then lunch, or vice versa. Janice noted that this shift decreased instructional time even more, “I
know kids may have missed it (in the morning), but I thought that you had more time because now there’s the transition time so you really get they say 25, but you might get 17 or 18 minutes of instructional time.” Maya also described a lack of accountability for the whereabouts of the students during the midday E-Block. “The middle school kids have figured out that they can actually hide or go elsewhere during that timeframe. And get away with it. We have kids now going to two lunches every day because they’re realizing, no one’s really checking up very tightly.”

At the elementary grades, teachers had common planning time built into their schedule (i.e., time to meet every other week as Student Intervention Teams), and most elementary grade levels met 1-3 times per month as Student Intervention Teams during their common planning time. In middle school, common planning time was departmentalized by subject area. In other words, English language arts teachers met together, math teachers met together, and other content area teachers (e.g., science and social studies) did not meet with any grade-level colleagues because there was only one science and social studies teacher for the whole middle school. Maya explained,

Support-wise, there’s absolutely no time in the middle school whatsoever where a group sits down and really talks about these kids and what’s going on. Um, strengths, weakness, interventions that are happening, supports that are happening… all of that is never discussed. That’s the thing I think that’s fallen off the most.

Liz, the middle school history teacher, corroborated this experience at the middle school, “My conversations about kids have been in the lunchroom. Like in the teachers’ room. Or passing in the hallway or like checking in with someone during my P and D.” Maya described trying to fit all of her responsibilities into two planning periods per week:
It’s time that’s supposed to be built into CPT but you have to discuss the ANET data. But you’re supposed to do curriculum planning. And this is one of two times all week that I can meet with my co-teacher. It’s honestly, do I want to talk RTI? Or do I want to talk planning? Planning. It always wins. Now do we talk about the kids that are Tier 2, Tier 3 during that planning time? Yes. Is it the RTI format? No.

Although they were creative in using the time that was available, all grade levels struggled to overcome the reality that there were just too few instructional minutes in the day to deliver interventions that felt sufficient and appropriate. Without time to meet with teachers supporting the same students, middle school teachers could not achieve a sense of shared ownership of students’ successes and challenges. At the elementary grades, teachers were also taxed with many responsibilities, but the dedicated time for common planning across the grade level, coupled with other times, such as lunch, allowed teachers to feel as though, as Audrey put it, “we all know what’s going on with all our students all the time.”

**Personnel resources.** Staffing and allocation of personnel affected the Robey’s implementation of RTI. All participants described the need for sufficient numbers of qualified personnel in facilitating and maintaining the implementation of the core components of RTI.

At the elementary level, the move to full inclusion and the related teaming model added staff at each grade level. Michelle described this as a critical facilitator of RTI implementation,

Well, part of the original problem is there just wasn’t enough people to try to do it. So that helps having more staff. And then, not even just for teaching but for the whole process of planning it and working through it. It helped having more staff thinking
through it. We definitely were able to divide the tasks and divide the planning and then bounce ideas off each other.

She also explained that the team teaching model of full inclusion allowed her and her grade-level colleagues to provide more differentiated core/Tier 1 instruction:

Now we co-teach. We parallel teach. We, I don’t always lead teach. We’re modifying things more. To meet the range (of students’ needs). And then, like once or twice a week we, we’ll use the homework as a check-in for a re-teach, you know. We’re able to keep more on top of that with support from my co-teacher but also the para is really helpful.

Michelle and her grade-level colleagues were able to evolve their delivery of interventions to capitalize on both time and personnel resources. The Team decided to use some of social studies time to create four, 45-minute intervention blocks per week occurring at the same time across two homerooms. The Team used English language arts data and math universal screening data to create eight small, leveled groups. Two teachers were in each room. In other words, one classroom teacher and the para-professional were in homeroom A, each working with a group for about 20 minutes. A second classroom teacher and the special educator were in classroom B, each working with a group for about 20 minutes. In this way, four groups were taught at a time, while the other four groups worked independently. After twenty minutes, the groups switched, so that all eight groups received 20 minutes of intervention and 20 minutes of independent work. Students who were at or above grade level worked with the para-professional on enrichment activities.

In this example, Michelle’s team was able to organize its personnel capacity in a way that supported the implementation of Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports to all students who needed
them. While the fifth grade team was able to do this during the 2012-2013 school year, they readily admitted that an overall small class size and students with mild to moderate needs (as opposed to students with more severe needs) contributed to its feasibility. As the fifth grade member of the Instructional Leadership Team noted, “I just thank God we have small numbers. Put it that way. When we have a good year we know it.” So although the move to full inclusion added staff at the elementary level, it also meant that some grade levels began educating more students with moderate to severe disabilities. As Audrey described, one student with significant behavioral needs could impact personnel availability in critical and unpredictable ways, “I mean, at one point I looked up and there’s three adults, they’re trying to just intervene on one child. And then I’m like, you know, that’s crazy. So that’s the tricky part.” Instances like that, which varied depending on the needs of the students in the classroom on any given day, made it challenging to plan for systematic delivery of interventions.

Although the middle school had created the E-Block to facilitate the delivery of interventions, teachers still struggled to deliver targeted small group and individualized Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. Paul explained, “It becomes a nightmare logistically because you want to keep classes small. Otherwise it doesn’t work. But where do the kids go? Because you only have so many staff members.” Further, some staff were better teachers than others. So it became not only an issue of the number of staff, but it also became an issue of the skills of staff. While the E-Block espoused an “all hands on deck” approach, not all hands were qualified to deliver strategic intervention or manage middle school behaviors. As Janice noted of the 2012-2013 school year, “I don’t believe that this year, that it’s based upon the
students’ ability. It’s based upon, do we have enough bodies for these children to go in this classroom.”

The issues with staff at the middle school also affected teachers’ ability to meet as grade-level teams. As Liz noted, “It’s a structural problem. Someone has to be teaching the kids when the teachers are meeting, right?” As noted in the prior section, to facilitate RTI implementation, middle school teachers needed a time to meet with other teachers at the same grade level working with the same students.

**Protocol.** Both the district and the Robey leadership asked teachers to use a structured, timed protocol to guide the Student Intervention Team meetings (see Figure 5.1).

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RTI Problem-Solving Meeting Protocol</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Each Student Intervention Team should have a permanent Facilitator, Note-taker and Time-keeper.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Which students get discussed?</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After looking at the universal screening data at each benchmark period, Student Intervention Teams will use specified criteria to determine which students may benefit from Tier 2 and/or Tier 3 interventions. At each Student Intervention Team meeting, teachers and staff will discuss 3-5 of these students. Over the course of about 6 weeks, the Student Intervention Team will be able to discuss all students needing Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions. The Facilitator will develop the agenda and provide it to Student Intervention Team members 2-3 days before the meeting. Teachers should bring additional data sources that may be relevant to the discussion of the students on the agenda for a given meeting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WHEN DISCUSSING A STUDENT FOR THE FIRST TIME… (11-minute timed protocol)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A) <strong>2 minutes</strong> – The classroom teacher provides/reviews information relevant to the student’s strengths and area of concern. Information should be based on concrete observable data. Note-taker records the data regarding the area of concern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B) <strong>3 minutes</strong> – Classroom teacher reviews the Core Curriculum and Instruction and whether student has in fact received Core. Consider absences, scheduling issues, fidelity of delivery of Core. Members of the Student Intervention Team discuss barriers existing in the Core and determine if changes need to be made to the Core.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
C) **3 minutes** – Members of the Student Intervention Team brainstorm an intervention that meets the student’s needs. Consider intervention groups already in place and whether the student may be a fit. Facilitator reminds Student Intervention Team to remain focused on specific area of concern as determined above.

D) **3 minutes** – Student Intervention Team reaches consensus on an intervention. Facilitator asks who will deliver the intervention? How often (when) will it occur? How will progress be measured? When will Student Intervention Team revisit this student? Note-taker records this and adds any notes to the Action Plan Summary.

**IF REVIEWING A STUDENT ALREADY RECEIVING INTERVENTION… (7-10 minute timed protocol)**

E) **1-2 minutes** – The classroom teacher provides progress monitoring data relevant to the area of concern and Student Intervention Team reflects on whether intervention was delivered with fidelity (i.e., delivered as intended). Note-taker records this.

F) **3-5 minutes** – Facilitator asks whether the progress monitoring data indicates that the student is responding to the intervention?

- If yes, note-taker records this in Action Plan Summary and Student Intervention Team determines whether to continue or fade intervention.
- If no, Student Intervention Team reviews the Core and whether student has in fact received the Core (considering absences, scheduling, etc.). Student Intervention Team then discusses modifying intervention (increasing time or intensity) or adding another intervention. Consider existing intervention groups whether the student may be a fit. Note-taker records this in Action Plan Summary.

G) **3 minutes** – Student Intervention Team reaches consensus on an Action Plan (e.g., modify Core, continue intervention, fade intervention, modify intervention, add new intervention). Facilitator asks who will deliver the (new or existing) intervention? How often (when) will it occur? How will progress be measured? When will Student Intervention Team revisit this student? Note-taker records this and adds any notes to Action Plan Summary.

*Figure 5.1. RTI Problem-Solving Conversation Protocol (Source: Wisteron Public Schools SAI Implementation Guidebook)*

The intention of this protocol was to streamline problem-solving conversations, keeping a focus on collaborative data analysis and intervention planning. In describing the implementation of RTI, most participants mentioned the protocol as a change in the way they
talked about students. For most participants, the protocol added a helpful structure to meetings and increased the focus on students. Jaime offered,

I think the protocol makes us talk about kids. I mean, I think we do a good job talking about kids but sometimes you know, we just don’t and it kind of is a spiraling effect. And I think the forced, not forced, but the structured talking to your colleagues about kids that you don’t know much about is great. Like it just, I wish it was part of everyday that we could do it.

Audrey’s team adapted the protocol between 2011-2013, and felt that it helped create a more collaborative structure to inform instruction,

I like the fact it helps us talk about information together and pull it all together and look at the ANET stuff, look at what the data is and say this is where that child is. Someone else might pick up on something, and I might pick up on something. It’s a work in progress but we get together and we look at the data and, oh yeah we went over this. The subtraction strategy, but not all of them are doing it, they didn’t do it, so we know where we can revisit with the instruction.

Maya also described the protocol as facilitating an increased focus on students, particularly in the middle school where she felt that was less apt to happen:

The format is cumbersome but it felt productive. It felt like we were all sitting at a table, we were given PD time to do this. And the kids really got discussed. And I felt like it was productive, and you even got suggestions from people that were not in your content area that maybe had a great idea that would apply to math. And so that was really helpful.
Maya’s middle school colleague, Liz, had a somewhat different take, “it was very formulaic, we have this form that we’re supposed to fill about this kid…. but I felt like every time we got to like the meat of a discussion, it was um, sort of squash-, not squashed because of like, we needed to stop talking about it, but we ran out of time.” She felt that while the protocol was intended to focus the conversation, the timed aspect limited substantive problem solving.

Relatedly, though it was intended to facilitate collaborative problem solving, the protocol also highlighted which teachers were or were not actually contributing to the conversation. Although Jaime appreciated the focused structure for problem solving and acknowledged that she was learning about students with whom she had never interacted, she also felt that as a special educator, she was viewed as the resident strategy expert. “It just seems like it’s me who’s, who’s talking the whole time. And yes, I’m getting … but it’s kind of not as collaborative as I would like it to be.” Jaime had inadvertently assumed the role of chief problem-solver and felt her colleagues tended to turn to her for suggestions and guidance on intervention planning. She had also taken responsibility for completing the meeting documentation. So while the protocol attempted to induce a collaborative problem-solving conversation, it could not transcend her colleagues’ perceptions of her as the special educator having the most expertise about intervention planning.

Liz, the middle school history teacher, had a related experience in that she felt like her expertise was less valued than that of other team members,

I felt as though I was kind of a passive-ish member of the team because I do remember specifically recommending students to discuss. And there were greater priority students to work with. I think the greater priority students were determined by
that core group that was on the team. My students never were really discussed, but they were very clear, which was fine. The people that were discussed were important. In this case, Liz perceived that there was a “core group” who had more input into the process—that is, teachers whose students were evaluated by the state tests in math and ELA. Although the protocol attempted to facilitate a collaborative problem-solving meeting, for Liz, it highlighted how her role as a history teacher separated her from some of her middle school colleagues. “I wasn’t, and still am not part of a common planning team. So not just with this, but (there are) a lot of things I miss.”

**Professional development.** Participants identified professional development as another technical structure that influenced their implementation of RTI. While they received a good deal of coaching support within the building from Catherine and from me as their external consultant, some participants felt they would have benefitted from additional structured professional development around interventions and the RTI model itself.

Teachers who served on the Instructional Leadership Team attributed a lot of their professional learning to conversations and work done as part of that team. Jaime explained, “We’ve had some after-school professional development about it and being on ILT was really helpful because you were there. We discussed it a lot.” She also indicated that common planning time meeting implicitly became a professional learning experience, “I think that our team, our common planning times, we came up with, or we’d use the protocol and so that kind of helped solidify it for me, having to go through the protocol and just being thrown into it.” Audrey corroborated that observation, saying, “We had a lot of support in our team meetings, walking through it, talking about it. We had support at Student Intervention Team and Instructional Leadership Team, just learning about it and practicing and figuring out how
it was all going to work.” Catherine acknowledged the role of the Instructional Leadership Team in building and developing understanding throughout the school, “That was all the ILT did for two years basically, was be the facilitators of this process, troubleshoot it, practice it, talk about it, go back and facilitate it with their teams.” However, Liz, the middle school history teacher who was not part of the Instructional Leadership Team or a common planning time meeting, felt “out of the loop.” She admitted that beyond the first year, she was unclear about how RTI had developed at the Robey.

Within the context of professional development for RTI implementation, Burns et al. (2013) have highlighted the prudence in providing teachers with examples of potential implementation models, including various screening and progress monitoring tools, evidence-based interventions, and teaming strategies for data-based decision making. Stokes and Baer (1977) have contended that teaching multiple exemplars is one of the most important factors in generalizing and sustaining innovations because it accounts for contextual differences in implementation settings and implementers. Indeed, data analysis revealed that Robey teachers wished they had received (any) exemplars of practice as a starting point for developing their own model of implementation. Michelle explained,

I did not feel prepared when I started. Unfortunately. I mean, I remember seeing it and getting um the diagram of the model, but I think it was called SAI then too. And then it changed name. And it took me maybe a little while to know, ‘Oh that’s the same thing (as RTI)’. So I did not feel very prepared. I felt we were learning as we did. I really like exemplars before I’m expected to do something, especially professionally. And, well, there wasn’t one.
Jaime pointed to a related issue around defining critical terms at the outset of implementation, “Some of the frustrations were, well, what is an intervention? What does it look like?” In addition to wanting more support around definitions of key terms, most participants also wished that they had received exemplars of specific small-group and individualized interventions prior to implementation. Paul explained,

We probably need like an ELA coach who knows five specific things to come in with the ELA teachers and says, ‘here are the five interventions I want you to choose from. Don’t worry about making other things. We know these five work. If you have this prototype of kid, try this one, if you have this prototype of kid, try this one.’ Sort of just give them the playbook. And then teachers can over the year develop and model them.

Over the course of three years of implementation, participants’ professional development largely occurred as a product of “learning by doing” (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010), as they negotiated decisions about RTI structures and essential components within the context of the Instructional Leadership Team and the Student Intervention Teams. While most participants acknowledged this as a positive professional learning experience, Liz’s perspective suggests that some teachers were left out. In other words, some teachers were not “learning by doing” because they were not “doing” – the school schedule did not allow all teachers to be involved in the Instructional Leadership Team and/or the Student Intervention Teams meetings.

Leadership

While Catherine, the Instructional Leadership Team, grade level teams and individual teachers were separately and together significant mediators of the implementation process as
it evolved from 2010-2013, data analysis revealed that Catherine’s focused and distributed leadership generally supported the implementation. Catherine acted as a key mediator of the adoption of RTI and its initial implementation, providing directives and accountability for establishing school-based infrastructures such as team meeting times, problem-solving protocols, use of data, and implementation of interventions. As implementation got underway, the Instructional Leadership Team became instrumental in the continuous refinement of the RTI model. Catherine facilitated teachers toward taking ownership of the model and toward professional learning through a “learning by doing” (DuFour et al., 2010) approach that engaged staff to co-construct decisions about RTI structures and essential components within the context of the Instructional Leadership Team and the Student Intervention Teams. Interestingly, although the Robey’s implementation occurred within the context of a district-level reform, participants shared their perception that the district-level leadership had little influence on the school’s implementation.

During the first two years of implementation, Catherine offered a lot of guidance and oversight of the development of infrastructures and processes (e.g., universal screening and progress monitoring schedules, problem-solving protocol). Audrey recounted of the first year, “It was directive, but sometimes you just have to bring everybody to that place. And then they’ll grow from there and they’ll take it and tweak it.” Catherine provided Student Intervention Teams with autonomy to adapt structures to respond to the particular needs of their grade levels. Maya elaborated, “Catherine is phenomenal. I really do enjoy working for her. She gives me latitudes that I don’t know if I’d have everywhere.” Michelle noted that Catherine acknowledged some of the structural and technical limitations in implementing the model, and tried to help the fifth grade team mitigate them, “Catherine gave us a sub so that
we could do all the assessment. So that’s a way she supports us too. I feel like she is always fighting for resources for us.”

All participants emphasized that while Catherine allowed teams to adapt processes, during the first two years of implementation (2010-2012), she maintained tight oversight of the implementation of essential features. Janice explained, “Last year we knew we had to do it three times a week, we also looked at the data, we said ‘ok, what does this kid need?’ We talked about the individual students. Every week you had to bring your students because you had to send Catherine an email saying what you did.” So even as she facilitated co-construction of the model by allowing teams to make some decisions about how the model would look, Catherine was still, in Audrey’s words, “tightly managing” fidelity of implementation of the critical components.

The third year of implementation was characterized by markedly less oversight by Catherine. As Audrey explained, “I feel like now it’s not only that she’s trusting us, I think she’s also pulled back in a way.” In this way, staff had even more opportunity to expand and innovate and, as presented in chapter four, drift from the practices they had established in prior years. Jaime spoke about the shift in Catherine’s leadership style, noting that she had “released it (RTI) a bit and allowed it to go,” but also saying that “during meetings she’ll mention it and ask how it’s going, and if we’re not talking about like RTI but we’re talking about a kid, she’ll be like, ‘well, what about an intervention group?’ And so she’s always bringing it back to that.” In this subtle way Catherine was facilitating her teachers to be leaders while still checking in. This was evident in Audrey’s account as well,

This year she’s set back, but she still checks in. Now it’s just a part of the way we work. So that’s great because we know what we need to do. We know the results. We
can look at the results of the test and say ‘gee, wait a minute.’ We did teach the fractions, and why didn’t they get this piece. And why did a third of the class not do successfully? So it’s good because it’s not being directed, but we’re utilizing it to get things done.

Notably, elementary grade level participants’ descriptions of Catherine’s shift in leadership highlighted how they were given the freedom to innovate and adapt the model, promoting its sustainability. However, middle school participants attributed her decreased oversight to their waning fidelity of implementation during year three. As Maya noted, “we’ve gotten far off” from the RTI model, and both she and Janice felt the release of responsibility was too quick.

While Catherine initially embarked on implementation as a part of the district’s rollout of SAI, data analysis revealed that district leadership did not heavily influence the Robey’s RTI implementation. As described in the prior chapter, a “pathology of bureaucracy” (Payne, 2008, pp. 122-124) was at play in the district administration’s inability to make clear and concrete decisions about critical RTI components (e.g., including in the Guidebook which universal screenings should be used district-wide). As such, Catherine made some early decisions around the Robey’s implementation of SAI/RTI that set it apart from the district’s model. Robey staff mainly accessed district support and guidance through a district-provided external consultant. As their external consultant, I provided information around best practices, though ultimately Robey staff collaboratively decided how their model developed and co-constructed their RTI implementation. As presented in chapter four, district leadership changed during the third year of implementation, and to most participants, SAI no longer seemed like a district priority. Catherine explained,
I asked at one point last year, at like a network meeting, because they were talking about all the new initiatives. I remember raising my hand and being like, ‘Just out of curiosity, like are we still doing SAI? Like does anyone still care about that?’ They were like, ‘Oh, that’s interesting. Yeah, well, you know, there’s a lot going on and…’

So although SAI was introduced in 2010 and touted as the new way of doing business in the district, by 2012-2013, the gusto around SAI had been replaced with energy for newer district initiatives. Liz lamented that this was a common occurrence in the district, saying, “I’ve been in Wisteron for twelve years so I feel like every two years something happens. Something big comes along. Sometimes I just wish that we would stick with one thing and actually get to those deeper layer conversations rather than try the next new thing.” Participants largely felt that regardless of the district’s leadership, the Robey would sustain the RTI model because, in the words of several participants, “it makes sense.” Further, at least at elementary school, a combination Catherine’s leadership and the technical structures that supported implementation had empowered elementary grade-level teams to innovate the model toward sustainability.

School Community

O’Connor and Freeman (2012) have suggested that one of the most overlooked factors affecting RTI implementation is the role of the culture that exists in a school or district. This subsection attends to the influence of the culture on the Robey’s RTI implementation, and subsequent subsection explores the influence of teachers’ beliefs, attitudes and practices. Data analysis revealed that a collegial school community and a culture of high expectations for students supported RTI implementation at the Robey.

Catherine described the Robey student population,
So the Robey serves I think a really diverse community actually, at a really like nice cross-section of Wisteron. And on paper K-1 to 8 whole school, we’re at approximately a third white, a third black, and a third Hispanic. With like a little bit of others culled in. And I think it’s a, a pretty nice socioeconomic cross-section as well. So it, we have kind of the full gamut, from you know politicians’ children to you know, kids who are in foster homes, and, I think, the full kind of Wisteron gamut. So I think it’s a really representative sample, with a solid kind of middle class in the middle. And so it’s a pretty, I think it’s a more stable community than a lot of communities in Wisteron. With that said, that also shifts as our kids get older and our middle school looks more like what one would think a typical Wisteron public school community looks like.

Maya, who had taught in the district for 13 years, echoed Catherine’s observations, “Racially it’s the most diverse school I’ve ever worked in. It’s a mix of urban and suburban. We have more family and community involvement in this school than in any other school I’ve ever worked in.” Michelle described her students, “It’s a very varied group because we’re a full inclusion school, so we have people with cognitive delays, people with autism. And then we have some really high-achieving students that perform quite well, quite high.” The handbook for the Robey articulated the following school mission:

The Robey K-8 School is committed to developing academic excellence in every child. We are a community of scholars. In partnership with families and the community, our staff provides a safe, nurturing learning environment for our children. We value the individuality of each child and strive to empower every student with critical and creative thinking skills. Working in collaboration with one another, our
staff models the habits of life-long learning, respect for others, and responsible citizenship that we aim to instill in every Robey student (Ramsey, 2012). Participants largely felt that teachers, staff and families embodied the mission of the school. In describing the Robey, Paul said, “It’s a high functioning school with lots of staff who have been around for awhile and know what they’re doing. It’s a well run school and has a clear vision. We have a high number of high-needs kids. And they function. I don’t think it’s like a typical Wisteron school. We’re sort of a gem that’s hidden away.” Jaime shared Paul’s perspective, “It is a warm, welcoming community. The families are really involved with their students. The teachers are really dedicated. I haven’t experienced this type of community in all of the schools in Wisteron that I’ve been at.”

Michelle elaborated on the collegiality she experiences with her colleagues, which has been fostered by the full inclusion model,

I think what helps me and my implementation is my team and the way we work together. And that we have, build on each other. Like some people, like I know what my strengths are, but I know what my weaknesses are, and we are open with each other. And we can help each other. I’m not an island. Like we have people in and out, right, but the beauty is that you can take a time out yourself. And you couldn’t do that if you were by yourself.

In this excerpt, Michelle described a level of professionalism and collegiality among her colleagues. She noted that Catherine had high expectations of staff but also trusted staff to do their work. Maya concurred:

I think that in this building we’re all professionals so we’re able to say, okay this is what we were taught to do, this is what we’re supposed to do, we go and we apply it,
and it’s just independently happening. It’s a professional environment… I don’t know how anyone can come in and not value what the adults in this building have to say. Everyone here is good at what they do. Cares about the kids. Cares about what they’re doing. And isn’t afraid to challenge one another. Which I appreciate.

Janice described a culture of high expectations for students. She talked about students growing up what she called, “the ‘Robey way’, you know, everybody here is focused on the students and wants to do what’s right for them. We push them and give them what they need to do the best they can. It’s very tight-knit here, it’s like a family.” She said that students who enter in sixth or seventh grade “need help just being a student, because they haven’t been raised by the Robey.” Maya agreed, highlighting the quality of teaching and teachers’ expectations, “I’ve found through the years that a lot of the Robey kids have a firmer grasp on their basic knowledge of mathematics than kids that have come in here (in middle school), you know, some still not knowing their, their multiplication facts or tables.”

This dedicated community of teachers and families supported the implementation of RTI. As will be presented in greater detail later in this chapter, participants largely saw RTI as a way to improve students’ achievement, which was consistent with the mission of the school. When asked if RTI fits with the culture of the school, Jaime said, “I do. I think ideally this is an inclusion setting and everybody gets what they need to succeed. In theory. It is challenging to make it happen. But I think RTI is great and gives us a way of trying to do it.” Participants understood the rationale of implementing RTI as a way to support student achievement. Data in this study revealed influential beliefs concerning the Robey students, teachers’ own practices, and the procedures and potential of RTI.
Teachers’ Beliefs and Practices

As with most reform efforts, the implementation of the RTI at the Robey was influenced by the “beliefs, practices and working relationships among teachers and students that make up the culture of the school” (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 255). As presented in the preceding subsection, every school has its own unique culture that is constructed by the people who comprise it. However, the norms, values, and practices that comprise the culture are not necessarily shared. Individual teachers’ beliefs and practices, which contribute to the school culture, affect teachers’ roles in school reform efforts (Datnow & Castellano, 2000; Evans, 2001; Hargreaves, 1994) and influence the implementation of the reform effort over time. Data analysis revealed that teachers’ beliefs and practices both hindered and supported the Robey’s RTI implementation.

Beliefs about students’ needs and abilities. As described in the preceding subsection, participants perceived the Robey community as having high expectations for students. During the interviews, I asked each participant, “Do you believe that all students can achieve at grade level if they have enough support?” and every participant responded affirmatively. So the high expectations aligned with a belief, shared by all participants, that all students could meet those expectations. Paul explained, “I think everyone here has always thought the kids can always achieve. So we didn’t say ‘well, he’s this and, and he can’t do it.’ I think people here have always said that kids can always achieve as long as they get the support they need.”

Audrey spoke about her beliefs about her students’ potential as well as her beliefs about her role in helping them achieve their potential:
You can get a class that’s really challenged with other areas, other things such as behaviors. You know that. Behaviors. Social. Transportation, illnesses, all those kinds of things. But um. I feel comfortable being able to say well I can see where you’re at, I can see what you need, but if I know what you need to be successful at this level, all the other things we can tie in, so if I need to do behavior, if I need to do the academic piece, I can kind of bring it together. Will all the changes in curriculum, it’s been a little dance, but I think my commitment to having them be successful at the end of third grade is one of the best things that I bring. I believe the goal is to try to bring all them to proficiency. I think it all depends on where they come in at least in the classroom and eliminating any, you know, challenges. But I think if the excitement is there, and the expectation is there, they can be brought up to um proficiency.

In this excerpt, Audrey was explicit about her role in helping her students achieve proficiency, citing excitement, expectation and her commitment to “bring it all together” as critical in helping her students achieve.

While Audrey and other participants described their personal beliefs and efficaciousness about being able to bring students to proficiency, several participants identified inconsistencies among staff in beliefs about what students needed to achieve. In numerous occasions in her interview and focus group, Catherine described inclusion as espousing the philosophy of “fair means everyone getting what they need.” In some instances, described previously in the subsections pertaining to personnel and time, staff did not feel that they were getting the support they needed to support their students. Teachers wondered about how efficacious they could be as students with moderate and severe needs progressed into the upper grade levels.
According to some participants, the belief about “that best thing” to support students often differed. Liz described how this tension manifested at middle school:

I think in order for this model to work we need to be on the same page about what students need. But what students need is different at elementary school than it is at middle school. And I’m not totally sure if middle school teachers understand needs of elementary school students and I’m not sure if our elementary school teachers understand the needs of middle school students. As much as you would need to really have a coherent... So I see us as still a bit as like two separate buildings in that sense. And how we house these things.

Here, Liz suggested that teachers’ approaches with students should rightly vary depending on the students’ developmental stages. However, she perceived that not all of her colleagues share this notion. She went on to identify what she viewed as a need for better understanding about each other’s values and beliefs:

I think just to have an understanding of one another’s philosophies. I think would make a difference. And every time we try to get into those conversations, or, we did it once in a PD, and we noticed how people would handle certain situations, we noticed there was a difference. But then there was no discussion about why is there a difference. So it’s like, ‘oh, so if I understand why you’re responding in this way, then I can understand you a little bit better’. Just understanding, oh yeah, we’re different, but I also know why he does it this way and I do it this way. And it’s not that one way is the right way.

In Liz’s view, differing value systems and experiences among her colleagues influenced how they approached situations with students. She highlighted a need for greater understanding
among staff about their own philosophies and experiences. So while all Robey staff purportedly wanted what was best for their kids and participants believed that students could achieve proficiency, some staff disagreed about how, when and for whom interventions should be delivered.

**Self-assessment of effective practice.** Within an RTI context, tools for individual teacher and program self-evaluation may influence the generalization and sustainability of RTI components (Riley-Tillman & Burns, 2009). These tools include checklists for fidelity of implementation of specific evidence-based practices (e.g., a reading intervention), and for implementation of various aspects of the RTI process more generally. At the Robey, self-assessment occurred in at least two ways, both of which supported the implementation of RTI.

As presented in chapter four, each year the Instructional Leadership Team completed a Self-Assessment of Problem Solving Implementation (SAPSI), a tool recommended by the district to monitor the progress and integrity of SAI/RTI implementation in a school. The tool was intended to a) identify which aspects of the SAI/RTI model have been implemented and the level of fidelity of implementation, and b) help teams develop short- and long-term action steps to support ongoing implementation. The SAPSI queried about critical components of RTI, including the use of universal screening procedures to identify students needing intervention and the fidelity with which research-based interventions were being delivered. Completion of the SAPSI helped the Instructional Leadership Team to think more broadly about the RTI framework and identify areas that needed improvement. Each year, as a result of this activity, the Instructional Leadership Team developed a list of action steps related to keeping RTI on track. For example, at the end of the third year of implementation, the SAPSI
helped the Instructional Leadership Team realize areas in which they had drifted from the original model of RTI. They started exploring reasons why the model had drifted at the middle school particularly. Questions from the SAPSI prompted additional self-assessment, evidenced in the below excerpt from an Instructional Leadership Meeting:

Fifth grade teacher: And, the main question is how do we make it not staff dependent? How do we make it so that it happens regardless if someone is out sick? Regardless if...

Orla: The meetings or the interventions? So there’s…

Maya: Both.

Orla: Okay.

Maya: Both. At the upper levels it’s too, it’s too easy to say.

Orla: Oh, so and so...

Maya: You can’t do that. You can’t do today because there’s people out and the [state assessment test] is happening and this schedule, this schedule. It’s too...

Paul: All real, it’s all real.

Maya: How do we make it less disposable?

In this exchange, Instructional Leadership Team members began wondering about how to limit the influence of personnel availability on the implementation of RTI. They had just shared issues related to maternity leaves, unexpected staff illnesses and available personnel being consumed with the needs of one or two students. The completion of the SAPSI prompted two additional meetings dedicated to action planning around how to sustain the model after Catherine resigned as principal.
A second method of self-assessment included teachers’ personal self-assessment of their practices. Several participants described how they came to “buy in” to RTI as a result of realizing that their own monitoring of students’ progress was insufficient. Michelle explained, “We had a horrible situation where we had two twins and one was ready to move on, the other wasn’t. And we really, we should’ve been on it sooner in the year. That was a very hard situation.” She highlighted RTI as a way of more frequently monitoring students’ progress so that she and her colleagues could make instructional changes more quickly. Her fifth grade colleague described a similar situation:

We had a group of kids that we realized by February actually needed to be retained. We had had no conversations about it before. All of a sudden it was like ‘Oh my God, how did we miss this?’ We should’ve known. But we didn’t have the time, the hands, the bodies, to give everyone like the benchmark. Like everything else, you learn the hard way.

Because of this self-assessment, the fifth grade team bought into the theory of the RTI model and adapted it to make it their own, that is, make it more useful and practical to their grade level. Other teachers also began changing their practices as a result of self-assessment. A first grade teacher who was a member of the Instructional Leadership Team explained that she and her colleagues added social skills instruction to part of their core curriculum after realizing that their students needed additional instruction in behavior. Audrey said that as teachers began to adopt RTI practices, the act of conducting progress monitoring became an implicit self-assessment that she believed resulted in some teachers changing their beliefs and approaches:
I think more teachers are beginning to look at the results of their assessments and tweak their teaching. Tweak their instruction. I think that’s really good ... We have what they had in September and that should look different. And if it doesn’t, what did you do? What do I need to do?

Self-assessment by the Instructional Leadership Team and at the grade levels was iterative and recursive. Teachers and administrators returned to issues repeatedly throughout the three years of implementation, modifying their understandings, reconsidering infrastructure issues, and often making adaptations as they experimented with new approaches to intervention and assessment at their grade levels. Notably, however, self-assessment was more prevalent at the elementary level in which teachers had dedicated common planning time to talk and problem-solve with same-grade colleagues, creating sort of a professional learning community about RTI. The practice of self-assessment, then, appeared to support the implementation of RTI because it regularly called attention to areas that needed refinement.

**Understandings and beliefs about RTI.** While participants demonstrated general understanding about the philosophy and essential features of RTI, they acknowledged that other teachers in the school struggled with aspects of it. Specifically, participants indicated that Robey staff differed in their understanding of critical terms related to RTI, which may have hindered implementation. The concept of interventions came up repeatedly, with participants suggesting that some staff struggled to understand both what intervention meant and how to provide intervention. Catherine reflected on this, noting that while many teachers and teams had bought into RTI,

I think there’s some teachers that feel like it’s an extra thing they shouldn’t have to plan. But I think really the root of that is they don’t really know what to do with it.
And I they’re still trying to figure out, I think, how to make the time useful. Like how can you effectively use 30 minutes, and I think it may be because people still aren’t fully understanding what interventions are.

Even the participants who understood RTI as a philosophy or framework for delivering data-informed instruction revealed some misunderstandings about it. In talking about some of the challenges with RTI, Maya stated, “so the only people, person I’m ever RTI-ing with, um, are my math colleagues. And a lot of the kids that I’m RTI-ing about are new to the school. So no one here is even able to talk about them.” Here she understands that RTI collaboration should involve more interdisciplinary problem-solving, but in saying “a lot of the kids that I’m RTI-ing about” she suggests that RTI may only apply to a specific group of students.

Participants’ understandings of and beliefs about the value of RTI were also evident in how they discussed prioritizing their tasks and responsibilities. At the elementary level, participants had largely espoused RTI as a way of using data to plan instruction and intervention. But at the middle school, participants described prioritizing other tasks over the implementation of RTI. Janice shared, “It’s the priorities, like there’s so many different things to do. Now we have the evaluations so there’s goals. You know that you have to get to, I have to plan for this, and then I have to plan for an enrichment class too?”

For Janice, RTI had not developed into a way to organize or think about the other responsibilities she had as a teacher. Although her work with RTI could have supported the development of her goals related to the teacher evaluation system, she viewed them as separate responsibilities. Maya also struggled to make time for RTI:

Because also it’s time that’s supposed to be built into CPT but you have to discuss the ANET data. But you’re supposed to do curriculum planning. And this is one of two
times all week that I can meet with my co-teacher. It’s honestly, do I want to talk RTI? Or do I want to talk planning? Planning. It always wins.

Middle school participants indicated that during the third year of implementation, they had not yet integrated RTI into their way of practicing. This finding may have resulted from the scheduling challenge, described earlier in this chapter, which prohibited middle school teachers to meet cross-functionally to discuss the same students. Because of this structural obstacle, middle school participants did not come to “own RTI” in the way that their elementary school counterparts did. So while they acknowledged its value, it had not become a part of the way they worked. As Catherine released her stringent oversight, other responsibilities took priority.

Responses to Implementation

Interviews, observations and document analysis revealed a variety of responses to implementation of RTI at the Robey. Because teachers’ responses varied so widely, it was impossible to develop a typology of responses by participant or to consider particular responses on a continuum from positive to negative. In fact, all participants acknowledged the complexities involved in this effort, and acknowledged positive outcomes as well as frustrating and troubling ones. Table 5.4 details the responses to implementation and provides a brief summary of each of these responses.

Table 5.4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response</th>
<th>Summary</th>
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<tr>
<td>Increased and shared focus on students</td>
<td>RTI implementation yielded an increased focus on students and a shared ownership for student success and challenge</td>
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Good in theory, tough in practice  
RTI makes sense in theory, but hindering conditions made it practically challenging and compromised fidelity of implementation and the integrity of essential features of the model

Making hard choices  
Constraints in resources forced teachers to make hard choices about who would receive intervention within the RTI framework

Variations in implementation  
Because RTI was co-constructed, implementation models varied across the grade levels

Student test outcomes are the essence of RTI  
RTI is being implemented to improve student academic testing outcomes

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Table 5.5 presents questions from the interview protocol that helped to generate participants’ answers related to responses to the Robey’s RTI implementation.

Table 5.5

*Questions Related to Responses to RTI Implementation*

- Has RTI changed the way you work with your colleagues?
- What changes have taken place in the Robey school as a whole? Changes in school culture and climate? School structure? Decision-making?
- What changes have taken place in your classroom?
- Has RTI caused you think about your students differently? Has it changed the way you think about what they are capable of achieving?
- Recall an incident that, for you, illustrates the essence of what RTI is at the Robey.
- Describe some of the feelings you have had during the implementation of RTI.
- What is the best and worst thing that has happened in the school because of RTI?
• Do you think RTI will last? Why or why not?

• Does the RTI model and goals fit with your vision or philosophies of education and styles of teaching? Why or why not?

**Increased and Shared Focus on Students**

RTI explicitly asks teachers to work together to use a structured problem-solving model to evaluate data to make informed decisions about instructional planning and intervention (Batsche et al., 2007; Gresham, 2007). At the Robey, teachers were expected to conduct frequent progress monitoring assessments on students who did not meet grade-level benchmarks. As described previously, the Robey’s implementation also included the use of a structured, timed protocol to guide Student Intervention Team meetings. While the teachers acknowledged numerous challenges with aspects of the RTI implementation, they appreciated the time dedicated to talking about individual student needs. Further, the Robey was a place where teachers reportedly believed that all students could meet high expectations. As a result of the protocol, the progress monitoring assessments, and the shift in thinking that RTI stimulated, participants described more student-focused conversations, a shared ownership of student challenges, and increased cross-functional collaboration.

The Robey’s culture of high expectations for all students aligned well with the consistent focus in Student Intervention Teams on the data indicating whether or not students had responded to instruction and intervention. The frequent assessments, dictated by the progress monitoring schedule, caused teachers to focus on students’ performance in ways they had not previously. Specifically, while teachers felt they had always used data to inform their instruction, the progress monitoring and Student Intervention Team meeting schedules
put a spotlight on formative data much more frequently. Michelle shared, “I have friends with kids and they’re older and they’ll think their kid is struggling, but they get high [state assessment test] scores. So I’m like oh, I could see how they would slip through the cracks in a system that wasn’t our system where we’re like, constantly doing other assessments. And learning about how they learn and so I do think it’s...I look at kids differently. They’re not just a [state assessment test] score.” Through formative assessment, teachers had a better pulse on how students were doing at any given time during the school year.

The Student Intervention Team meeting protocol reduced extraneous conversation that had previously distracted teachers from talking about individual students. Several participants noted that although teams had always tried to talk about kids, conversation about logistical tasks, such as developing materials, general curriculum planning and scheduling, usually dominated the agenda before RTI. Since the implementation of RTI, teams had become more diligent about reviewing progress monitoring data and checking in on the progress of individual students. Although special educators were still seen as experts in the area of intervention, participants noted that general education teachers were more prepared to engage in data-informed problem solving. Although the ways of doing this varied across grade levels, Catherine observed that at many grade levels, “intervention” and “data” had become part of the vocabulary used to talk about all students. Jaime noted, “Even kids that aren’t receiving the services are still being talked about. So I like that aspect of it. We really try to hit the kids, not as diligently as we should, but we try to hit every child by the end of the week.” Catherine was also able to use data to engage parents of high-achieving kids who were worried that their children weren’t being challenged, “I explain that we also use our data to create enrichment and challenge opportunities.”
Participants related that student challenges felt shared among staff. Paul explained,

I think that the ‘all, some, few’ idea is starting to stick. That there’s a different way, kids can all be inclusive getting everything in class and we can find other ways to get them more, not have to do a sub-separate classroom. At other schools if were a regular ed teacher and you had this kid who wasn’t doing what they’re supposed to do, then oh well, refer them (to special education) and move on. And definitely not here in general.

Participants also noted that teachers began holding themselves to higher standards in terms of instruction and began sharing accountability for students’ lack of achievement. Audrey described:

Before I think it was ‘oh, they didn’t teach it in second.’ You know, or, ‘they didn’t teach it in the grade before.’ There was blame.

The intersection of inclusion and RTI yielded a greater sense of shared responsibility for student success and challenges, and as a fully inclusive school, the Robey received additional human resources to try to meet the needs of all students within the general education classroom to the extent possible.

**Good in Theory, Tough in Practice**

Several participants reacted to the RTI implementation with the same phrase, “it’s good in theory, but tough in practice.” And the participants that did not use that exact phrase certainly communicated that sentiment. Evans (2001) has noted that reformers often pay little attention to the lived realities of educators who must accomplish change or to the practical problems of institutional change – a blind spot that he calls “fatal” (p. 91). While by all accounts Catherine and the Instructional Leadership Team attempted to refine infrastructures
to promote RTI implementation at the school and classroom levels, participants reported technical difficulties that persisted despite these efforts. As described in greater detail previously, participants articulated time and personnel resources as significant factors in inhibiting the overall effectiveness and fidelity of implementation of RTI.

Participants largely understood the premise of RTI and wanted it to work. They noted that RTI fit well with the culture of the school and with their beliefs about the potential of students. But teachers struggled with maintaining fidelity of core RTI components when challenges arose that seemed beyond their control. It was difficult to adhere to specified practices for problem-solving documentation, meeting times and intervention delivery when each team’s situation was unique and changed with the needs of each student who enrolled, particularly as the school transitioned to a full inclusion model. At some grade levels, it was hard to meet consistently as a Student Intervention Team and many grade levels struggled to implement tiered interventions in the ratios suggested by research.

McIntosh, Filter, Bennett, Ryan, and Sugai (2010) have suggested that school leadership must attend to the fit between the conceptual framework of a reform initiative and the contextual variables of a given school or classroom. In this case, Catherine and the Instructional Leadership Team realized that in order to sustain RTI, grade levels teams must be given a lot of leeway in how they implement the core components of RTI while also maintaining fidelity to the conceptual model. At one Instructional Leadership Team meeting in the Spring of 2013, all team members nodded in agreement when a fifth grade teacher proposed a flexible model of implementing RTI for the upcoming year, “As long as the goals are, check in frequently. The higher the need, the more often the check in. Have a plan. When are you going to, how often, and how, and what are you going to look for.” While this plan
allowed for variations in implementation of meeting times and protocols, other obstacles remained, such as having a sufficient number of trained personnel to deliver instructional interventions to small groups of students. This practical reality, likely an issue in many urban schools, threatens the goals of the RTI framework.

**Making Hard Choices**

Relatedly, one of the more troubling responses to RTI implementation was the sentiment, shared by most participants, that some students were not getting appropriate instruction. As described above, participants understood and largely believed in the theory behind RTI but were challenged to make it work in practice. Because of the resource limitations, teachers were constantly deciding which group of students was going to receive intervention. Paul elaborated, “We have to make hard choices. Is an inclusion student going to get the academic support at times, or are they going to get the social support while other kids are getting academic support?” In other words, not all students who fell below benchmarks could receive tiered intervention in all of the areas in which they needed it. Jaime agreed:

I think sometimes in an inclusion setting if you have such needy kids, they tend to be the ones that in the Tier 3 interventions, so sometimes I feel like those kids that are middle of the road don’t get the interventions that they need because the significant need is with the inclusion kids.

Further, when students did receive intervention, technical constraints often resulted in compromises to the quality of instruction, and teachers struggled to deliver targeted small group and individualized Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions. Paul hesitated to assign his “best” teachers to the small groups because he found that those were the teachers who also had the
strong classroom management skills needed to work with large groups of middle school students. “I need my best teachers doing it (intervention), but then my best teachers are usually the ones that have the best management, so it’s easier to give them 35 kids because they can handle 35 kids.” So it became not only an issue of the number of staff, but it also became an issue of the skills of staff. Participants also noted the sometimes significant behavioral challenges presented by their inclusion students and wondered about how efficacious they could be as students with moderate and severe needs progressed into the upper grade levels and the discrepancy between them and their peers widened.

The theory underlying RTI assumes that all students are capable of achieving and should receive high-quality, differentiated instruction in the general education setting to the extent possible. The aim of RTI is ultimately to improve instruction and learning for all students. However, data analysis suggested that despite good intentions, some Robey teachers were ill-prepared to instruct students who learn and behave in different ways. Further, several participants indicated that some staff continued to believe that pullout special education offered the best instructional setting for some students and viewed RTI as district-conceived strategy for reducing the numbers of students who received costly special education support. Catherine elaborated, “People had all these conspiracy theories about like, I get paid more if we keep our (special education) referrals down.”

While the Robey espoused a vision of full inclusion and adopted RTI as a framework for achieving that vision, failure to deliver high-quality, differentiated instruction to all students meant that some students were meaningfully included and others were not. As Michelle asked, “If somebody’s in the hall for 80% of the day (due to unmanageable behaviors), is that really inclusion?” Participants were universally concerned about this
phenomenon, but were not sure how to overcome it. Without more attention to how RTI can actually work in resource-scarce settings like urban schools, RTI implementation may in fact perpetuate some of the inequities it was designed to ameliorate.

**Variations in Implementation**

Mehan et al. (2010) contended that thinking of reform as a co-constructed process underscores the fact that educators, that is, design team members, teachers and principals, are not merely compliant actors responding to directives; rather, they are actively shaping and developing the reform through their everyday actions (p. 101). As such, reform ends are joint accomplishments of educators who are participants in different social contexts and practices, as opposed to products of policy makers working in isolation from educators (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000). In the Robey’s implementation, Catherine and the Instructional Leadership Team asked for particular commitments from teachers around the core components but also gave teachers the autonomy to shape the model in a way that worked for their respective grade levels. As a result, there were a variety of RTI models in place across the grade levels.

While participants agreed with the premise of RTI, all participants made adaptations of one type or another, some of which were fairly significant. Most participants adapted the recommended ratio for delivering Tier 2 and 3 supports, generally delivering intervention to larger groups of students than is recommended by the research. Several participants described deviations from the problem-solving approach to RTI, whereby they were to develop individual intervention plans for each student, noting that such an approach was unrealistic given the number of students needing intervention. Instead, they applied more of a standard treatment approach to larger groups of students needing Tier 2 intervention, that is,
delivering the same standard intervention to the whole group. The fifth grade team changed the problem-solving protocol to better meet their needs and style. Michelle noted, “I don’t think she (Catherine) was thrilled about that, but she let us use the one we made.” While other teams also deviated from the protocol, teams generally adhered to the key components (problem definition, goal development, implementation plan and evaluation) of the problem-solving approach. Consistent with research that suggests that teachers adapt reforms to suit their students’ needs (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2003), Jaime explained how her second grade team had adapted the screenings and assessments to make them more useful,

Assessments are just so broad and so, they don’t get to the heart of the matter. This year one of the things that came out of our, um, our initial screening was that addition facts weren’t, at like, the kids didn’t know addition, didn’t know subtraction, so we kind of created our own fluency screenings to see if it was just us or if it was the other things in the assessment.

Participants made adaptations for both pedagogical and logistical reasons, and noted that the changes made RTI more feasible and meaningful for them. Burns et al. (2013) have suggested that one of the biggest threats to RTI implementation is the fidelity with which the model and its component parts (i.e., collaborative problem-solving, decision rules, high-quality core curriculum, and tiered interventions) are implemented. However, while adherence to the conceptual framework of RTI is necessary to promote its effectiveness, consideration of its contextual fit is important to its sustainability within a particular school (McIntosh et al., 2010). The variations in implementation that occurred throughout grade levels at the Robey speak to this point and suggest that some level of adaptation may be necessary to meaningfully engage teachers and promote RTI sustainability. At the same time,
questions arise around how much modification is too much. In other words, how much adaptation constitutes drift from the conceptual model of RTI and impedes its effectiveness as a systemic approach? The school-level self-assessment (i.e., the SAPSI) seems to offer one way of monitoring the implementation process at the building level so that core components are retained but teachers and grade levels teams are empowered to make the model their own.

**Student Test Outcomes are the Essence of RTI**

Despite their varied approaches to implementing RTI and their frustration with implementing aspects of the model, all participants agreed that RTI was essentially about improving student test performance. When asked to recall an incident that symbolized what RTI was all about, with the exception of Catherine, all participants described situations in which an underperforming student or group of students achieved significant academic test gains. Audrey shared,

> It would be looking at the students that were on IEPs last year, working with the teacher that I did last year. Looking at them, setting the goals. And they met those goals on their ANET scores. So we used data to determine what the goals were and focused on what we were gonna do. And it worked. And then for both the teacher and I, you know cause we co-taught, to see the scores increase and to see the students say, ‘I’ve met that goal, I’ve passed that goal’. Those are symbolic moments for me.

Jaime noted, “My reading group that I’ve been working with came in at a level B. And most of them are at I’s now. So just seeing the progress. I even feel like honestly without fidelity because of attendance, that extra little focused time is just really pushing them to go forward.” Janice said that during the second year of implementation she was actually surprised with how well her middle school students responded to intervention. She described
how their data motivated them and how they began having competitions with themselves about how much progress they could make. Paul also noted of that group, “When it came time to take the [state assessment test], they were so well-prepared, they blew it out of the water.”

Given the numerous implementation obstacles, challenges and processes participants identified related to RTI implementation, I might have expected that they would have responded in a different way when asked to recall an incident symbolizing RTI at the Robey. Perhaps they would have described the crunch they are feeling in juggling varying responsibilities, or the increased collaboration they are experiencing with their colleagues, or the difference in how instruction is provided to all students. Only Catherine recalled an incident which spoke to the changes in the professional relationships on one team – how they came to own RTI and developed a true collegiality as a result of the work. Every other participant recalled situations in which students achieved significant test gains. This finding speaks to the culture of high expectations within this school and, moreover, the emphasis both in and outside of the school on test-based measures of accountability. While improving test scores is a positive outcome, it seems important to avoid reducing the aims of RTI to this single objective. Throughout implementation, teachers might benefit from more explicit and frequent reflection about how RTI is changing their instructional practices and influencing learning, which could increase buy-in, promote sustainability, and generate more equitable practices.

**Interpretive Summary**

In this chapter, I presented the conditions that influenced the RTI implementation process at the Robey, and teachers’ responses to RTI implementation. Data analysis revealed
that implementation was supported by focused school leadership that espoused a “learning by doing” approach and meaningfully engaged staff in decision-making about the model. The intersection of inclusion and RTI generally yielded a sense of shared responsibility for student success and challenges, though special educators were still viewed as having the most expertise about intervention planning. Over the course of three years, some grade-level teams retained and adapted critical components of the model while others waned in their fidelity of implementation. The variations in implementation that occurred throughout grade levels suggest that some level of adaptation may be necessary to meaningfully engage teachers and promote RTI sustainability, but also generate questions around how much modification is too much. The school-level self-assessment (i.e., the SAPSI) seems to offer one way of monitoring the implementation process at the building level so that core components are retained but teachers and grade levels teams are empowered to make the model their own.

Technical structures and supports played a significant role in how implementation occurred. Time and personnel were intertwined in that participants struggled to use these limited resources to most effectively support students. Elementary grade-level teams were more successful in mediating hindering conditions than their middle school counterparts. This appeared to be related to structural features of elementary school, such as shared common planning time meetings, which facilitated greater ownership of RTI. Middle school participants in particular were influenced by issues with the schedule and departmentalization of personnel that limited opportunities for authentic collaborative problem solving. Further, because of constraints in time and personnel resources, teachers and administrators sometimes had to make difficult decisions about to whom and how to deliver support. As a result, some students received high-quality, differentiated instruction and others did not. This
suggests that without more attention to how RTI can actually work in resource-scarce settings like urban schools, RTI implementation may in fact perpetuate some of the inequities it was designed to ameliorate.

A collegial school community and culture of high expectations for students supported RTI implementation. Participants largely saw RTI as a way to improve students’ academic achievement, which was consistent with both the mission of the school and with participants’ beliefs that students could be brought to proficiency with appropriate support. However, this highlights the emphasis both in and outside of the school on test-based measures of accountability. It also substantiates one participant’s perspective that there was a “core group” of faculty who had more input into the RTI implementation process—that is, teachers whose students were evaluated by the state tests. While improving student test scores is a positive outcome, it seems important to take measures during implementation to avoid reducing the aim of RTI to this single objective.
CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

As of 2011, 94% of schools across the county reported some level of response-to-intervention (RTI) implementation (Spectrum-K12, 2011). Despite this, much of the existing research on RTI has focused on exploring assessment practices across tiers and the efficacy of specific interventions (e.g., Gresham, 2007; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005; VanDerHeyden et al., 2007), providing an overly simplistic view of RTI and overlooking the complexities involved in sustainable school-wide implementation. Numerous scholars have recently called for more research that investigates the complexities of school-wide RTI implementation (e.g., see Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; Wixson, 2011). This qualitative single case study, informed by a theoretical orientation that situates reform as a co-constructed process, has responded to this call by investigating how staff at one urban K-8 school constructed and implemented the RTI framework as part of a district-level reform effort. The following research questions were addressed:

3. How did the implementation of the school’s RTI model occur?
   a. Beginning with the school’s involvement in SAI, what was the sequence of events in the implementation of RTI?
   b. What were key decisions regarding implementation and how were they made?
   c. What factors hindered/promoted implementation?

4. How have school staff influenced the school’s RTI implementation?
   a. How have school staff beliefs about urban students influenced the school’s RTI implementation?
b. How have school staff responded to the implementation?

Table 6.1 presents the major categories of influencers on the construction of RTI and associated concepts that resulted from the analytic methods described in chapter three. In this final chapter, I integrate and discuss the major findings presented in chapters four and five, offer implications for both practice and research, and describe the study’s limitations.

Table 6.1

*Findings Presented as Major Categories of Influencers on the Construction of RTI*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major Categories of Influencers on the Construction of RTI</th>
<th>Associated Concepts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Process of implementation</td>
<td>Co-construction; exploration; adoption; implementation; decision-making; innovation; drift</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supporting/hindering conditions</td>
<td>Co-construction; technical supports and structures; grade-level teams; teachers’ beliefs and practices; school community; leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responses to implementation</td>
<td>Co-construction; focus on students; shared ownership; fidelity of implementation; equity; variations in implementation; student outcomes</td>
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</tbody>
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Data analysis revealed that the implementation of RTI at the Robey occurred in a recursive and complex process and followed a framework described by many other scholars (e.g., see Fixsen et al., 2005; Fullan, 2008; Fullan & Pomfret, 1977), which has established that although there are stages of implementation (e.g., exploration, installation, initial implementation, full implementation, innovation, and sustainability), these stages often overlap and do not occur in a specified order (Fixsen et al., 2005). In the Robey’s implementation, innovation represented a key feature, and variations in implementation that occurred throughout the grade levels reflected responses to cultural variables and unique grade-level contexts.
The Robey’s RTI implementation was supported by focused school leadership that espoused a “learning by doing” (DuFour et al., 2010) approach and meaningfully engaged staff in decision-making about the model. The intersection of inclusion and RTI generally yielded a sense of shared responsibility for student success and challenges, though special educators were still viewed as having the most expertise about intervention planning. Technical structures and supports played a significant role in how implementation occurred. Time and personnel were intertwined in that participants struggled to use these limited resources to most effectively support students. Further, because of constraints in these resources, teachers and administrators sometimes had to make difficult decisions about to whom and how to deliver support. As a result, some students received high-quality, differentiated instruction and others did not. Finally, a collegial school community and culture of high expectations for students supported RTI implementation. Participants largely saw RTI as a way to improve students’ academic achievement, which was consistent with both the mission of the school and with participants’ beliefs that students could be brought to proficiency with appropriate support.

In section that follows, I use the perspective of co-construction to integrate these findings and discuss the process of RTI implementation at the Robey.

**The Process of Implementation through the Lens of Co-Construction**

Many improvement schemes, rooted in the rational-structural paradigm of change, concentrate on the diagnosis of current illnesses and the prescription of ideal cures, cures that emphasize positions, policies and procedures rather than people. They pay little attention to the lived realities of the educators who must accomplish change or
to the practical problems of institutional innovation. This blind spot is more than just unfortunate; it is often fatal (Evans, 2001, p. 91).

Like many urban districts across the nation, the Wisteron Public School district has for years struggled to eliminate significant achievement gaps among student groups, address a persistent dropout crisis, and more appropriately identify and instruct students with special education needs (Halle et al., 2011). These ongoing challenges prompted the WPS superintendent in 2009 to engage senior staff in conversations about developing a systemic and systematic framework for change. With the help of an external team of educational consultants, WPS leadership established SAI, which was intended to establish a multi-tiered system of supports that incorporated collaborative problem solving, progress-monitoring, and data-informed interventions and supports in academics and behavior in all of the 125+ public schools in Wisteron. Formally announced to principals by district leadership in August of 2010, SAI immediately became a framework for school-level staff to implement. However, substantiating Payne’s (2008) observations of the “pathology of bureaucracy” in urban districts (pp. 122-124), Liz noted the district’s culture of frequently adopting and dropping new initiatives, saying, “there’s so many things that have been district-implemented that no longer exist.” Consistent with MacDonald and Shirley’s (2009) observations about “repetitive change syndrome” (p. 6), this culture contributed to teachers’ cynicism around reform initiatives, as Michelle questioned, “Does anything last in the district?”

The study revealed that although SAI was a district-led effort, school-level implementation at the Robey was, in many ways, a personal process. Data analysis substantiated the view that reform implementation is complex and that what works in one setting, or grade level, may not in another (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Datnow et al.,
revealing that the implementation of RTI at the Robey was dynamic, co-constructed by numerous influences, and resulted in varied responses. Although the school adopted the SAI model that was developed by the district, its implementation at the school, and particularly across grade levels, reflected a co-constructed and evolving approach shaped mainly by the school culture and community, individual teachers’ beliefs and practices, and the variable availability and use of technical infrastructures.

The process of implementation is always a challenge for local educators, as it asks them to learn and enact new procedures and protocols in addition to their existing responsibilities (Fixsen et al., 2005). Figure 6.1 presents a way of conceptualizing the co-construction of the RTI implementation at the Robey, where political, cultural and technical influences came together to shape the implementation process (Datnow et al., 2002; Hubbard et al., 2006).
Much scholarship has attended to the change implementation process (e.g., see Fixsen...
et al., 2005; Fullan, 2008; Fullan & Pomfret, 1977), and has established that although there are stages of implementation (e.g., exploration, installation, initial implementation, full implementation, innovation, and sustainability), these stages often overlap and do not occur in a specified order (Fixsen et al., 2005). This was true too in the Robey’s RTI implementation, where innovation occurred at every phase. District administrators’ “constant and active support” for a reform has been called a necessary condition for local implementation (Berman & McLaughlin, 1978, p. 33, as cited in Spillane, Gomez, & Mesler, 2009). Evans (2001) has similarly contended that for reform to work, everyone must be clear about its purposes, policies and procedures, and as such, related communication must be “lucid, vigorous and repeated” (p. 77). While the district in this study ostensibly espoused a theory of co-construction, the guidance disseminated by the district came mainly in the form of a Guidebook which reflected little concrete attention to how educators at the Robey, a resource-limited urban school, would actually put the model into practice.

Throughout implementation, the district disseminated SAI policy and procedures primarily through the SAI Implementation Guidebook, which was developed to provide schools with timeframes, tools (e.g., sample meeting agendas, data organizers, planning checklists, parent letters, self-assessments) and problem-solving protocols for establishing and implementing key SAI infrastructures. The Guidebook was first distributed to schools in October of 2010 and was updated twice to incorporate adaptions and innovations resulting from feedback from schools. However, no version of the Guidebook contained specific information about which universal screening and progress monitoring tools to use; which interventions to use; or how to deliver interventions within the constraints of the school schedule and available qualified personnel. As such, Catherine was a key driver of the
Robey’s RTI implementation, providing directives and accountability for establishing school-based infrastructures such as team meeting times, problem-solving protocols, use of data, and implementation of interventions. Over time, innovation and adaptation were necessary to respond to cultural variables and fit unique grade-level contexts.

The components shown in the top part of Figure 6.1 represent the district-level change process, with the dashed lines indicating ongoing gaps in the practice-policy communication loop between the district and the RTI Leadership Team at the Robey. Although the district had announced SAI and held an orientation for school leaders in August of 2010, materials and protocols to support implementation were not disseminated until two months later, and even then there were substantive pieces missing. I was not assigned as an external consultant to the Robey until October of 2010 and at that point the district had not issued any systemic guidance about essential components of the model (e.g., particular assessments to use for universal screening). As noted above, that specific guidance never came from the district as no future version of the Guidebook contained it either.

Further, consistent with RTI research that has suggested that the coordination of tiered instructional delivery in a way that effectively capitalizes on building resources is one of the most daunting aspects of school-wide implementation (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009), Robey teachers were unsure about how to use their personnel and instructional resources to deliver tiered intervention in addition to mandated core curriculum, and the district did not provide guidance in this area. Rather, the district adopted a problem-solving approach to its implementation of SAI. As a reminder, in the problem-solving approach to RTI, the interventions are fluid and differ from child to child depending on individual responsiveness, with the building-level educators taking responsibility for making intervention decisions.
Participants found the problem-solving approach to RTI to be unrealistic in light of both the time available to meet and the time available to provide interventions.

With substantive gaps in guidance from the district, innovation became a key feature of the Robey’s implementation process (see bottom part of Figure 6.1). Decisions such as which universal screening and progress monitoring tools to use and how to deliver instructional interventions were initially made by Catherine and the Instructional Leadership Team. Over time, with and without Catherine’s blessing, individual Student Intervention Teams made their own decisions about which assessments were most effective for progress monitoring and how to deliver interventions, for example. Even when using a structured, timed protocol for problem-solving, teachers struggled to discuss and develop action plans for all of the students who had needs. Many teams moved to RTI’s standard treatment protocol or a hybrid of the problem-solving and standard treatment protocol approaches, in order to more efficiently utilize available resources. Mehan, Hubbard and Datnow (2010) have suggested that thinking of reform as a co-constructed process underscores the fact that implementation occurs as face-to-face interactions among real teachers confronting real challenges in a real school. This supports the perspective that reform “implementers—whether they are situated at the state, district, or school levels—are simultaneously the object of reform and the agents of change” (Mehan et al., 2010, p. 102). To this point, Robey educators made continual adaptations for both pedagogical and technical reasons, noting that the changes made RTI more feasible and meaningful for them. This is also consistent with scholarship that has suggested that while adherence to the conceptual framework of RTI is necessary to promote its effectiveness, consideration of its contextual fit is important to its sustainability within a particular school (McIntosh et al., 2010).
Despite variations in implementation across grade levels, by the third year of implementation, conceptual consistency existed in terms of the majority of the critical components of RTI at the elementary school grade levels (see lower left section of Figure 6.1). While the procedures differed, the general idea was that students who were not making adequate progress would be monitored more frequently and would move within the framework so that they received more intense instruction. The variations in implementation that occurred throughout grade levels at the Robey suggest that some level of adaptation may be necessary to meaningfully engage teachers and promote RTI sustainability, but also raise questions about how much adaptation is too much. Specifically, at the middle school, issues with the schedule and departmentalization of personnel hindered opportunities for authentic collaborative problem solving. If teams are not collaboratively analyzing and problem solving using data, it seems debatable whether the RTI framework is in fact being enacted.

Relatedly, Morgan and Ramirez (1983) have posited that those immersed in a system struggle “to monitor and question the context in which it is operating and to question the rules that underlie its own operation” (p. 15). External support groups have been shown to assist use of the practice-to-policy communication loop and help the district team to remove barriers and strengthen facilitators for producing desired outcomes (Fixsen et al., 2013). At the Robey, the Instructional Leadership Team was instrumental in the continuous refinement of the RTI model. While scholars have suggested that implementation team members should have special expertise regarding evidence-based programs, implementation science and practice, improvement cycles, and organization and system change methods (Fixsen et al., 2013), the Instructional Leadership Team at the Robey did not. Nevertheless, they were largely responsible for making it happen, that is, for assuring that RTI implementation was
proceeding at the individual grade levels. This team was supported by training and technical assistance from me as an external educational consultant hired by the district. I oversaw the completion of an annual self-assessment of the school’s implementation, a process that served to help the team take stock of how implementation was going. This was a useful exercise that illuminated the innovations, adaptations and deviations occurring at grade-level teams and assisted the Instructional Leadership Team with planning for sustainability.

Frederick Hess, in his book, *Spinning Wheels: The Politics of Urban School Reform* (1999), has written about how urban schools endure an endless, churning stream of new initiatives, with schools and teachers always trying to adjust to changes and becoming increasingly skeptical about their staying power. Indeed, amidst the Robey’s implementation of RTI, they adopted a full inclusion model, and while not a focus of this dissertation, WPS also rolled out a new teacher performance evaluation system in response to external pressures. Additionally, teachers were expected to update existing curricula to reflect the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices [NGA Center] & Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO], 2010). District leadership changed during the third year of implementation, and to most participants, SAI no longer seemed like a district priority. So although SAI was introduced in 2010 and touted as the new way of doing business in the district, by 2012-2013, the gusto around SAI had been replaced with energy for newer district initiatives, such as those mentioned above. However, participants largely felt that regardless of the district’s leadership, the Robey would sustain the RTI model because, in the words of several participants, “it makes sense.” Further, at least at the elementary school, a combination of Catherine’s strong leadership and oversight and the technical structures that supported implementation had empowered the elementary
grade-level teams to act “simultaneously [as] the object of reform and the agents of change” (Mehan et al., 2010, p. 102), innovating the model toward sustainability.

**Implications for RTI Implementation**

The above discussion provided a broad overview of the process of implementation through the lens of co-construction. In integrating the findings presented in chapters four and five, several implications emerged related to schools’ implementation of RTI, addressed in depth in the upcoming subsections. Table 6.2 links these implications to the findings.

Table 6.2

**Finding Supporting Implications for Implementation of RTI**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Implication for Implementation</th>
<th>Supporting Findings</th>
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| Self-assessment is critical to promoting quality, fidelity and sustainability | • Innovation of practice and drift from the model were observed  
• Self-assessment of practice supported implementation  
• RTI makes sense in theory, but hindering conditions made it practically challenging and compromised fidelity of implementation and the integrity of essential features of the model  
• Because RTI was co-constructed, implementation models varied across the grade levels |
| School leadership should share power and encourage co-construction | • Decisions were co-constructed by admin, grade-level teams and ILT  
• Focused school leadership supported RTI implementation |
| Resources matter | • Time, personnel resources, meeting protocols and professional development opportunities influenced RTI implementation in varying ways |
| Elementary and middle school implementation must occur differently | • RTI makes sense in theory, but hindering conditions made it practically challenging and compromised fidelity of implementation and the integrity of essential features of the model  
• Features of elementary school allowed elementary... |
grade-level teams to mediate hindering conditions more successfully than their middle school counterparts

Culture and beliefs matter

- A collegial school community and culture of high expectations for students supported RTI implementation
- Teachers’ beliefs about students’ needs and abilities influenced RTI implementation in varying ways

RTI implementation must seriously attend to issues of educational equity

- Constraints in resources forced teachers to make hard choices about who would receive intervention within the RTI framework
- Teachers’ beliefs about students’ needs and abilities influenced RTI implementation in varying ways
- A collegial school community and culture of high expectations for students supported RTI implementation

Self-Assessment is Critical to Promoting Quality, Fidelity and Sustainability

As presented in chapters four and five, strong support and relatively vigilant monitoring by Catherine were not enough to guarantee fidelity of implementation to the RTI model, as some grade-level teams retained and adapted critical components of the model while others waned in their fidelity of implementation. This is consistent with other research into reform that has noted that even when teachers received a lot of support, “inevitably, teachers closed the doors to their classrooms and made adaptations to the program, some of which appeared to be major, and some of which were minor” (Datnow & Castellano, 2000, p. 795; see also, Baker, Gersten, Dimino, & Griffiths, 2004; Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 1998; Gersten & Dimino, 2001). The annual completion of the SAPSI helped the Robey’s Instructional Leadership Team to think broadly about the RTI framework and identify areas that needed improvement and related action steps; as such, its completion supported the
school’s overall implementation process over three years. However, it did not guarantee uniform or complete implementation at the team level. Individual grade levels teams and teachers made ongoing micro adaptations and alterations at the classroom level, consistent with scholars who have suggested that some level of adaptation may be necessary to meaningfully engage teachers and promote RTI sustainability (Burns et al., 2013; also see Fixsen et al., 2005). In this sense, adaptations are not negative occurrences but, often, necessary ones. Hall and Loucks (1978) identified a “configuration continuum” that conceptualized adaptations made to an innovation as occurring on a spectrum from “developer’s model” to the “point of drastic mutation” (pp. 17-18). They argued that adaptation is acceptable and sometimes even encouraged—up to the point of drastic mutation, at which time what is being done no longer actually is the innovation. RTI implementers must attend to this balance between adaptation and fidelity in order to promote sustainability while preserving the integrity and conceptual consistency of the framework.

As noted, annual completion of the SAPSI supported the Robey’s RTI implementation because it regularly called attention to areas that needed refinement. Additionally, some teachers conducted informal grade-level self-assessments of their practices. Several participants described how they came to “buy in” to RTI as a result of realizing that their own monitoring of students’ progress was insufficient. But this grade-level self-assessment was not systematic or consistent throughout the school. At some grade levels, technical constraints resulted in compromises to the quality of instruction, and teachers struggled to deliver targeted small group and individualized Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions—at one grade level, “small group” Tier 2 instruction occurred with a group of 17 students. Because the middle school level had no time for authentic collaborative problem
solving, teachers were unable to work together to analyze data and make decisions. They used data, but they analyzed without the insights of their peers. These types of adaptations represented significant deviations from the core elements of the RTI framework, which emphasizes collaboration and high-quality instruction for all learners. Although schools may adopt RTI with the best intentions to provide high-quality tiered instruction, to collect and analyze student data, and to meet regularly with colleagues to problem solve, it can be easy to veer off path due to competing priorities or insufficient technical infrastructures.

Recent conceptual work has suggested that within an RTI framework, tools for individual teacher and overall program self-assessment may help mediate some of these challenges and promote generalization and sustainability of RTI components (Burns et al., 2013, p. 85). Findings from this dissertation support this recommendation. Despite research linking quality of reform implementation with student outcomes, the process of monitoring the quality of implementation is often overlooked, or given lower priority than measuring outcomes (Domitrovich et al., 2008). Further, while it seems logical that ensuring the fidelity of each component of the model would lead to the integrity of the system as a whole, this is not always the case (VanDerHeyden, Witt, & Gilbertson, 2007). Therefore, the fidelity of the complete RTI implementation process must be monitored.

Keller-Margulis (2012) has suggested that such systems-level monitoring should include the core components of RTI, the inclusion of multi-method and multi-informant data collection methods, and provision of feedback to those involved in the RTI implementation. Other research has suggested that change implementers should identify both the core components of an innovation that should receive emphasis in terms of fidelity as well as the less central features that can be adapted to achieve a good contextual fit (Durlak & DuPre,
2008). As such, schools implementing RTI should identify the core components of the model (e.g., use of data in decision-making, provision of high-quality instruction and interventions) and provide a clear operational description of what each component should look like when it is implemented as intended, while identifying aspects that can be adapted without impeding implementation. This school-level self-assessment should be completed at least annually to monitor the development of infrastructures and systems at the school level. There are several examples of RTI self-assessment tools available in the public domain. The district in this study adapted its SAPSI from a tool developed by the state of Florida (http://floridarti.usf.edu/resources/format/pdf/sapsi.pdf), and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education has also developed a tool (http://www.nasdse.org/Portals/0/SCHOOL.pdf), and there are others.

School leadership should also establish a systematic process for grade-level RTI teams to conduct self-assessments that monitor fidelity of grade-level practices (e.g., Tier 2 intervention). From a practical perspective, it makes most sense for teachers to self-report their fidelity using a checklist, but periodically, an outside observer (e.g., another teacher) who understands the component (e.g., Tier 2 intervention) should also observe fidelity, with more frequent observations when fidelity is of concern (DiGennaro, Martens, & McIntyre, 2005). This observer should provide feedback and suggestions as needed, which has been shown to improve fidelity (Noell et al., 2005). Multi-informant, multi-method indicators of fidelity allow a strong assessment of the degree of discrepancy between how RTI practices were intended to be implemented and the way they are actually being implemented in real-world settings by school system personnel (see Domitrovich et al., 2008).
School Leadership Should Share Power and Encourage Co-Construction

The Robey’s implementation was supported by Catherine’s focused and distributed leadership. She set the tone for innovation and co-construction in her initial implementation of the framework, rejecting the district-conceived name “SAI” and working with the Instructional Leadership Team to create infrastructures that were responsive to the Robey’s context. Catherine facilitated teachers gradually taking ownership of the framework and assuming professional learning through a “learning by doing” (DuFour et al., 2010) approach that engaged staff to co-construct decisions about RTI structures and essential components within the context of the Instructional Leadership Team and the Student Intervention Teams. Moreover, while Catherine was vigilant in her oversight of practices during the initial years of implementation, during the third year she pulled back and gave teams more autonomy to adapt the model. In this subtle way, Catherine facilitated and trusted her teachers to be leaders and to continue to co-construct the model, while she still periodically checked in on conceptual consistency. This finding reflects reform research that emphasizes while the role of the principal necessarily changes during implementation, the principal must remain focused on protecting the school’s vision for the reform work (Copland, 2003).

The size and composition of leadership teams has been shown to affect the distribution of leadership in a school building (Camburn, Rowan, & Taylor, 2003). In establishing the Instructional Leadership Team at the Robey Catherine used an application process to recruit representation from every grade level, though she admitted that grade level teams decided “internally” who would apply. In addition to serving on the Instructional Leadership Team, these individuals also became the facilitators of the Student Intervention Team meetings at their grade levels, and they received stipends for their additional
responsibilities. The Instructional Leadership Team was instrumental in shaping the Robey’s RTI implementation, making decisions around the assessments, interventions and professional development that guided the work. Several participants attributed a lot of their professional learning to conversations and work done as part of that team, but Liz, the social studies teacher, bemoaned feeling “out of the loop” around RTI implementation, as she had never been part of the Instructional Leadership Team. Literature on the implementation of positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), a multi-tiered framework focusing on behavior, has suggested that a school-wide leadership team should be composed of individuals who are respected by their colleagues, are representative of the school (e.g., by grade level or department), have a regular means of communicating with the school staff as a whole, and are endorsed actively and vigorously by the principal (Sugai & Horner, 2002, p. 39). While Catherine generally succeeded in establishing an effective Instructional Leadership Team that was representative of all grade levels, it seems important, particularly in a K-8 setting, to include teachers of “non-tested” subject areas who are being increasingly marginalized in this era of standards-based reform (O’Connor, Heafner, & Groce, 2007; Smith & Kovacs, 2011).

As such, when installing and implementing RTI, findings from this dissertation suggest that school leadership should adopt a stance of co-construction, supporting teachers to share leadership in making decisions around key structures, including assessment and collaborative problem solving times, to ensure that practices make sense in the local classroom contexts. School leadership should maintain focus on the vision of the work while allowing grade-level teams to make contextual adaptations that improve implementation and do not drastically change or drift from the vision of the framework. Finally, the leader should
establish an RTI leadership team that meets regularly, is representative of grade levels and subject areas, and shares responsibility for constructing and facilitating implementation at the classroom level. The composition of this team should be evaluated and changed as needed each year to ensure that various staff have an opportunity to participate. The RTI leadership team should serve as a link between the work of the classroom teachers and the formal school leader, facilitating the school-level practice-policy communication loop (see the lower right side of Figure 6.1).

**Resources Matter**

Hess (1999) has suggested that, “more than anything else, effective school reform requires that the school system focus on making the desired change work. This requires resources, time and commitment” (p. 154). Consistent with this, technical structures and supports played a significant role in how RTI implementation occurred at the Robey. Namely, limitations in time, personnel and professional development posed challenges to educators as they figured out how to make the most of constrained resources.

O'Connor and Freeman (2012) have observed that allocation of time and staff to RTI activities represents a factor that, if insufficiently appropriated, can inhibit the effective implementation of RTI. Indeed, at the Robey, time and personnel were intertwined in that participants struggled to use these limited resources to most effectively support students. More specifically, middle school participants were influenced by issues with the schedule and departmentalization of personnel that limited opportunities for authentic collaborative problem solving. Some teachers struggled to use a highly structured, timed protocol to “cover” all of the students who had needs—there just were not enough minutes to problem-solve about each student. As a result, many teams moved to RTI’s standard treatment
protocol or a hybrid of the problem-solving and standard treatment protocol approaches. These findings suggest that it is essential to provide grade-level teachers with protected time to regularly meet together to problem solve. Additionally, the problem-solving approach to RTI may not make sense for schools that have large numbers of students needing Tier 2 and Tier 3 support. School leadership in urban settings should consider the merit of implementing a standard treatment protocol approach at Tier 2 and a problem-solving approach at Tier 3—that is, a hybrid model that leverages the feasibility and enhanced fidelity of the standard treatment protocol but allows for individualized problem solving for students demonstrating the most significant learning needs.

Coordinating tiered instructional delivery in a way that effectively capitalizes on building resources has been called one of the most daunting aspects of school-wide RTI implementation (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; see also Kupzyk, Daly, Ihlo, & Young, 2012), one which requires “masterful scheduling” (Stahl et al., 2012, p. 371). At the Robey, teachers and administrators sometimes had to make difficult decisions about to whom and how to deliver support because there were not enough instructional minutes or qualified staff to provide all students with the support they needed. This finding suggests that that school leadership should rethink personnel allocation and schedule configurations, including how much time should be dedicated to particular subject areas, to allow for increased instructional minutes for intervention. While the Robey adopted the E-block in an attempt to capitalize on their personnel resources, teachers still struggled to keep group sizes small and to appropriately match students with teachers who could address their needs, resulting in compromises to instruction for some students. This finding has implications for middle school RTI implementation, which are discussed in more detail in the subsequent subsection.
Additionally, Higgins Averill, Baker, and Rinaldi (in press) have cautioned that while school-wide intervention blocks offer a promising mechanism for delivering effective and targeted instruction, school leadership should assign the most highly qualified educators to the students whose intervention needs are greatest and should attend to the fit between the skills of educators and the needs of students. This recommendation presumes, though, that educators are in fact prepared to meet the needs of highly diverse, high-needs student populations, such as those learning in the full inclusion setting at the Robey. Therefore, this finding has implications at both the pre-service and in-service levels, as D. Fuchs et al. (2012) have noted,

RTI must include a level of tertiary prevention that is capable of serving most difficult-to-teach children and youth. Effective educators at this level will be instructional experts. They will be knowledgeable about curricula and instructional approaches across domains and will collect data on each of their students to understand whether and when their instruction is working. They will embrace the premise that, for many of their charges, effective treatments are derived across time through trial and error but guided by their knowledge and experience. They will be patient, persistent, and tolerant of ambiguity (p. 271).

This type of expertise emerges from rigorous pre-service education and ongoing in-service professional learning. However, per recent research (Allday et al., 2013; Prasse et al., 2012), many early career teachers do not enter the schools with the skills and understandings needed to practice with a multi-tiered system of educational services.

The findings of this study also have implications for professional development. Consistent with the recommendations of Burns et al. (2013), findings suggest that RTI
implementation efforts should include numerous exemplars of potential implementation models, including various screening and progress monitoring tools, evidence-based interventions, and teaming strategies for data-informed decision making. Teaching multiple exemplars represents an important aspect of generalizing and sustaining innovations because it accounts for contextual differences in implementation settings and implementers (Stokes & Baer, 1977). Research has also shown that the use of exemplars in adult learning fosters greater understanding of expectations, promotes learning so that higher quality outcomes are produced, and provides a focus for meaningful formative feedback (Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2002). Further, findings from this study pointed to a culture of high expectations as supporting RTI implementation, but also highlighted tensions that existed around how, when and for whom interventions should be delivered. School leadership should provide professional learning opportunities that facilitate staff to explore and mediate tensions and differences in values, beliefs and perspectives. Finally, school leadership should provide professional learning opportunities that espouse a “learning by doing” approach (DuFour et al., 2010) that engages all staff to negotiate decisions about RTI structures and essential components in a way that responds to the context and culture of the school and classrooms.

**Elementary and Middle School Implementation Must Occur Differently**

Findings from this dissertation revealed that the structural features of the elementary school better positioned teams to mediate challenges related to RTI implementation. Despite strong school leadership and teachers’ creativity in using the instructional time that was available to deliver interventions through the E-block, the middle school struggled to overcome the reality that there were just too few instructional minutes in the day to deliver interventions that felt sufficient and appropriate for the large number of students who needed
them. Further, without time to meet with teachers supporting the same students, middle
school teachers could not achieve a sense of shared ownership of students’ successes and
challenges.

These findings suggest that RTI implementation needs to occur differently at middle
school than it does at elementary school, but what should that “different implementation”
look like? Indeed, the middle school participants at the Robey were struggling to figure out
how to make RTI work within their structure and made several adjustments to their approach
over the course of three years. It seems imperative that school leadership provide dedicated
time for middle grade teachers of the same students to meet together to problem solve using
data. This is clearly easier said than done and requires school leadership to think outside the
box to find time for teachers to meet. For example, it may be worth exploring before- and
after-school meeting options for which teachers could receive a stipend or utilize some of
their contracted professional development time.

In terms of instructional delivery, L. S. Fuchs et al. (2010) have recommended that in
a middle school RTI model, teachers should immediately provide the most severely
discrepant students with Tier 3 support, rather than moving them more fluidly through
increasingly intensive levels of the support. In contrast to elementary school RTI
implementation where the focus is on preventing academic failure, L. S. Fuchs et al. (2010)
have contended that in the middle school RTI implementation, the focus should be on
reducing and eliminating sizable academic deficits that already exist. Though findings from
this dissertation do not support a particular model of RTI implementation at the middle
school, L. S. Fuchs et al.’s (2010) proposal represents a seemingly viable option to
approaching middle school implementation differently from elementary school. However, it
still begs the question of who is providing this instructional support, when and to whom? To operationalize this, schools will need to figure out how to identify students who require immediate Tier 3 support and will need to determine what Tier 3 support should look like at the middle school. In other words, how many students should receive this level of intervention at one time? Who should be delivering the intervention? What content or other school event should the students miss to receive this intervention? What constitutes “responsiveness” and triggers a fading of intervention? How will teachers be supported in this practical and cultural shift? More research on middle school RTI implementation is needed before these questions can be answered.

**Culture and Beliefs Matter**

O’Connor and Freeman (2012) have suggested that one of the most overlooked factors affecting RTI implementation is the role of the culture that exists in a school or district. Schein (1992) has contended that culture implies that “rituals, values, climate and behavior [form] a coherent whole” (p. 10). In this view, culture is a construct that reflects the deep and powerful integration of component factors (e.g., norms, assumptions, beliefs). Research has further indicated that educators’ beliefs about issues such as student learning and instructional strategies impact their willingness to implement new practices (Fang, 1996). Findings from this dissertation affirm the influence of culture and beliefs on RTI implementation, revealing that a culture of high expectations for students and a shared belief that students could meet those high expectations promoted RTI implementation at the Robey. Notably, while all participants believed that all students could achieve proficiency when instructed well, tensions existed around how, when and for whom interventions should be delivered. Nevertheless, for the most part, Catherine had facilitated a strong school culture of
collegiality, shared leadership, trust, and high expectations that conduced teachers to meaningfully engage in the RTI implementation effort. Of the Robey’s implementation, Catherine noted that even though she initially received some pushback related to already full workloads and worries about additional expertise needed, the decision to adopt RTI was not a hard sell, largely because “it made sense” to staff, aligned with the mission of the school and addressed an ongoing problem of practice.

These findings suggest that school leadership should intentionally attend to school culture and teachers’ beliefs before and during the implementation of the RTI framework. Specifically, in exploring possible implementation of RTI, school leadership should attend to the fit between the RTI framework and the vision and mission of the school, a recommendation supported by this dissertation as well as extant research (Fixsen et al., 2005). There are a several resources available in the public domain for engaging staff in conversations about beliefs related to RTI implementation. For example, the state of Florida has developed a beliefs survey (http://floridarti.usf.edu/resources/format/pdf/beliefs.pdf) that probes educator beliefs about student learning, the role of data in decision-making, and expectations for the effectiveness of instruction. Information such as could be gathered from results of this survey could provide school leadership with a sense of the belief systems in the school that may hinder or support implementation, and may act as a starting point for a mediated school-wide dialogue aimed at exploring differences in values and beliefs.

Relatedly, school leadership should provide ongoing professional learning opportunities for facilitated conversations about the beliefs, values, experiences and perspectives that shape educators’ practices and decisions. As Liz noted, “teachers need to be on the same page about what students need… and all those things that come up about why a student is
struggling in school. I think just to have an understanding of one another’s philosophies. I think would make a difference.”

RTI Implementation Must Seriously Attend to Issues of Educational Equity

As described in chapter one, urban school districts across the country face overwhelming pressure to remedy equity issues pertaining to persistently low achievement and high dropout rates among subgroups of students from minority populations. Historically, in pursuit of educational equity for students who have been pushed to the margins of schools, teachers and administrators have relied on special education initiatives that perpetuate the fragmentation of educational services. Frattura and Capper (2006) have contended regarding the categorical model of special education,

Segregated programs result in some students receiving support, while others do not. With segregated programs, those students who need the most routine, structure, and consistency in their day experience the most disruptions when placed in separate programs, become fringe members of their classroom community, and miss valuable instructional time when traveling to and from separate programs. Once in these programs, students are denied access to a rich and engaging curriculum that could boost their academic achievement. Segregated programs inadvertently blame and label students and marginalize and track students of color and low-income students. Segregated programs prevent the sharing of knowledge and skills by educators, prevent any particular educator from being accountable to these students, and enable educators not to change their practices (p. 362).

Gottlieb, Alter, Gottlieb and Wishner (1994) even suggested that in urban districts, the traditional discrepancy-based eligibility procedures have been intentionally ignored in an
effort to cull scarce resources for low-achieving students, resulting in an overrepresentation of certain subgroups in special education. Increasingly, districts have adopted the RTI framework as a systemic reform effort aimed at responding to these challenges (Artiles, Bal, & Thorius, 2010; Murawski & Hughes, 2009; Sailor, 2009; Wixson, 2011), with the hope that the RTI framework will engender high-quality instruction and improved achievement for all students in the general education setting to the extent possible. Educating all students well in the general education setting is a noteworthy goal, and, some would argue, an enormously optimistic one in light of the research pointing to the institutionalized systemic barriers preventing certain subgroups of students from meaningful participation in general education settings (Artiles et al., 2010; Kozleski & Huber, 2010; Kozleski & Smith, 2009). While the focus of this dissertation was not inclusive education per se, the Robey adopted a full inclusion service delivery model during its second year of RTI implementation and attempted to use the RTI framework as a vehicle to provide all students with high-quality, tiered instruction in the general education setting. Findings from this study suggest that school leadership must attend seriously to the institutional capacity of urban schools—that is, technical and structural resources, teachers’ beliefs and values about urban students, and the tenor of the school community, among others—to educate all students well through the RTI framework.

RTI implementation at the Robey was supported by a positive school community and a culture of high expectations for students, conditions which are fairly unusual in urban schools (Payne, 2008). Nevertheless, while all Robey staff purportedly wanted what was best for their children and participants believed that all students could achieve proficiency, some staff disagreed about how, when and for whom interventions should be delivered—tensions
which were reportedly never explored or mediated in a professional learning setting. Further, several participants felt that they were not getting enough support in learning the specific instructional interventions that were needed to support their students, particularly students with significant behavioral challenges. Relatedly, one of the more troubling findings was the sentiment, shared by most participants, that some students were not getting appropriate instruction. As described in prior sub-sections, several factors contributed to this occurrence: time, personnel and the large number of students needing support. While school leadership tried to optimize personnel resources by developing the middle school E-Block, which espoused an “all hands on deck” approach, not all hands were qualified to deliver strategic intervention or manage middle school behaviors. As one participant noted of the 2012-2013 school year, “I don’t believe that this year, that it’s based upon the students’ ability. It’s based upon, do we have enough bodies for these children to go in this classroom.”

Further, findings revealed that the current national emphasis on test-based measures of accountability seemed to obscure for participants the potential of the RTI framework to improve other aspects of schooling (e.g., better teaching, more equitable instructional delivery, professional collaboration). When asked to recall an incident that symbolized what RTI was all about, every teacher described situations in which an underperforming student or group of students achieved significant gains on the standardized state achievement test. This finding speaks to the culture of high expectations within this school and, moreover, the emphasis both in and outside of the school on standards-based measures of accountability. In a discussion of problems related to 21st century school reform in the United States, Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) argued that moral issues of inequality and social justice which should be a shared social responsibility have been converted into technical issues to be
resolved through “analysis of voluminous amounts of numerical achievement data” (p. 29). While improving test scores is a positive outcome, it seems important to avoid reducing the aims of RTI to this single technical objective.

Prior to implementing RTI, leadership of urban schools must think seriously about the school’s cultural and structural capacity for delivering meaningful and equitable instruction to all learners. Otherwise, it seems that schools may risk perpetuating inequities that the RTI framework attempts to ameliorate—that is, denying some groups of students a high-quality education. Consistent with Artiles et al. (2010), who suggested that “framing RTI as a solely technical endeavor … will ultimately exacerbate the possibilities of reproducing past inequities” (p. 256), school leadership should attend meaningfully to the institutionalized beliefs and practices of school staff and offer mediated, safe opportunities for staff to explore tensions among their ideas and perspectives. School leadership should guarantee that teachers are appropriately supported in delivering the instructional strategies necessary to teach students with significant learning and behavioral challenges. School leadership must willingly consider alternative ways of using instructional resources, so that no student is short-changed in his or her learning experiences. Finally, school leadership should facilitate explicit and frequent reflection about if and how the RTI framework is changing teachers’ instructional practices and influencing genuine learning for all students.

In offering these implications, I acknowledge that there are significant challenges inherent in operationalizing them. Relatedly, although I used the term “school leadership” in presenting these implications, I acknowledge Hargreaves and Shirley’s (2009) contention that “the moral issues of inequality and social justice … should be a shared social responsibility” (p. 29). This means that all areas of society—communities, businesses,
government, schools and students themselves—must take collective responsibility to challenge and disrupt practices that sustain educational inequities. So while it is naïve to think that school leadership alone can tackle these issues, their attention to them during RTI implementation represents one aspect of what Waitoller and Kozleski (2013) have characterized as a “continuous struggle” toward inclusive education, one that transforms culture, structure and instructional practices to transcend rhetoric and realize actual change.

**Implications for Future Research**

This study has contributed to the relatively small amount of extant research exploring how school-based educators construct and implement the RTI framework (e.g., see Abbott et al., 2008; Stahl et al., 2012; White et al., 2012) and has responded to calls for more research that investigates the complexities of school-wide RTI implementation (e.g., see Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012; Wixson, 2011). By drawing on a theoretical orientation that situates reform as a co-constructed process (Datnow et al., 1998), I was able to attend to decision-making processes, the larger political context of the district, the local context and culture of the school, and the role of educators’ beliefs and practices as implementation the framework in the context of a district reform. These findings are important as districts and schools learn how to operationalize the good intentions and promise of the RTI framework in ways that actually make sense in urban educational settings, which have historically been plagued with significant achievement gaps among student groups, high dropout rates, and high percentages of students receiving special education services (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

That noted, during data collection and analysis, I wondered how the study would have been different if I had approached its design and execution from a theoretical stance of critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998) or intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Much of
my work has been with urban schools like the Robey that are adopting inclusive practices and utilizing the RTI framework as a mechanism for advancing their visions of inclusive education—a laudable goal but one that will almost inevitably involve the eradication of deep-rooted institutionalized challenges (Waitoller & Kozleski, 2013). It seems important that future research should explore more deeply whether and how the RTI framework is contributing to more inclusive and equitable educational practices. Relatedly, this study did not directly explore the relationship between RTI implementation and instructional practices. Future research might offer a qualitative investigation of changes in instruction resulting from data-informed collaborative problem-solving decisions and the effects of these changes on students’ perceptions of the learning environment.

Additionally, while my sample did not include all members of a particular team, findings from this study suggest that the role and agency of the school-level leadership and grade-level RTI teams are influential in implementing the framework. It would be useful to investigate this by foregrounding the micro-political interactions and personal relationships occurring on various RTI teams, exploring each team’s construction of the RTI framework and thus offering a rich and nuanced picture of what contributes to team agency in the process of RTI implementation. Further, findings from this study indicated that the district’s leadership played a limited role in school-level implementation. Future research might explore the influence of strong and involved district leadership in implementation.

Finally, findings from this study point to more research needed in the area of middle school RTI implementation. The bulk of literature on RTI has attended to aspects of the model as implemented at the elementary grade levels (e.g., see D Fuchs et al., 2012; Torgesen, 2009; Torgesen, 2001; VanDerHeyden et al., 2007; White et al., 2012), and thus
there are few research-based exemplars of how middle grades should operationalize components of the framework. Specifically, it would be useful to learn more about data-informed decision making processes; scheduling for effective instructional delivery and collaborative problem-solving; roles of educators, particularly those of non-tested subjects; and instructional delivery formats for delivering tiered intervention at the middle grades.

Limitations of the Study

All research has limitations; however, many of these limitations are only detrimental when researchers try to generalize findings inappropriately. This study’s qualitative design is subject to the limitations associated with a small sample size and lack of generalizability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The Robey school has particular qualities that may further limit the case as an illustrative example; namely, the Robey has a collegial school community and culture of high expectations that is not typical of urban schools (Payne, 2008). Additionally, in its second year of implementation, the Robey adopted the full inclusion model and gained additional staff through its teaming approach, creating an unusually high personnel capacity for implementation. However, the purpose of the case study design is to expand theories, not to generalize findings to populations (Yin, 2009), and this single case study was intended to advance existing theory on system change as related to implementation of the RTI framework.

The study was limited by the time in which I conducted it. I collected data over five months during year three of a three-plus year implementation effort. As discussed in many places throughout this dissertation, the implementation of change takes time and, moreover, occurs in nonlinear, recursive stages over time. While I explored how implementation occurred by collecting numerous forms of data, including interviews that probed about the
implementation process, it would have been useful to conduct more interviews over the entire implementation period. Specifically, if I had more time, I would have interviewed participants twice per year throughout the entire implementation effort to obtain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the implementation process.

Another limitation related to the sample. While I employed maximum variation sampling and believe my sample represented a variety of perspectives, I did not anticipate the divergent perspectives of the teacher of a “non-tested” subject (Liz). While I was glad she was part of my sample, the study may have benefitted from the voice of another teacher of a non-tested subject area to triangulate Liz’s perspectives to some extent. Further, as I collected and analyzed data, the role of the individual school leadership and grade-level RTI teams emerged as influential. This study may have benefited from interviews with an entire team or teams of educators.

The final limitation relates to my role as the sole researcher and thus the main instrument of data collection. In this role, I had to exercise “theoretical sensitivity” to make decisions about which data to foreground and which to leave in the background (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 42), ultimately limiting what was investigated. I brought my own biases and perspectives to the research, which undoubtedly influenced which data were privileged. However, as described in greater detail in chapter three, I acknowledged my reflexivity and took steps to minimize its influence, which likely mitigated this limitation.

**Final Reflection**

I came to this study believing that the RTI framework had the potential to improve educational opportunities for all children, particularly those learning in urban settings. My belief in this regard has not changed, but through this dissertation I have come to better
understand the entrenched political, technical and cultural factors that challenge effective implementation and thus limit the potential of the RTI framework. My study illuminated some of the complexities of real-life implementation at one school, but the field needs more research that deeply explores how implementation actually happens in various urban educational settings over time. Relatedly, researchers and leaders of urban schools must attend seriously to the cultural and structural capacity of schools to deliver equitable instruction to all learners through the RTI framework. In engaging with educators at the Robey, I was heartened by their investment in the construction of RTI, their creativity and innovation in the interest of pedagogy and the needs of their students, and their beliefs in the abilities of their students. While acknowledging that the Robey’s culture of high expectations is somewhat of an anomaly among urban schools (Payne, 2008), the Robey’s implementation of RTI at the elementary grades offers a sense of what is possible when synergy exists among the school’s culture, structures and leadership.
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Appendix A

Dear Robey Staff,

My name is Orla Higgins Averill; some of you know me as the external consultant supporting the Robey’s implementation of SAI/RTI. I'm also a doctoral candidate at Boston College, and I'm hoping for your help with my dissertation study, which will look at how staff at the Robey have constructed the SAI/RTI framework throughout the past several years. To gather this information, I'd like interview teachers and administrators to gain your insights on how SAI/RTI has been implemented. I'm interested in hearing a variety of perspectives, so please consider participating regardless of your level of involvement with SAI/RTI.

I plan to interview each participant once, and expect that the interview will take approximately 45-60 minutes. Then, in June, I would ask that all participants meet for a 45-60 minute focus group, where I will share preliminary findings and ask for your feedback. **Any and all information you share will be strictly confidential;** only general/shared patterns of changed behaviors, challenges, and successes will be identified. Study participants will receive a $10 gift card to Dunkin Donuts, and I'll provide you with a meal during the focus group.

Please let me know your interest and availability for one 45-90 minute interview in the next month or so. I really appreciate your willingness to help with the study, and I'll work with your schedule to meet whenever is most convenient for you. You can contact me by email at orlahiggins@gmail.com or by phone at 617-610-1033.

Thanks again,

Orla
Appendix B

Boston College Consent Form

Boston College Lynch School of Education
Informed Consent for Participation as a Subject in “One school’s implementation of an urban systemic response-to-intervention (RTI) framework”

Investigator: Orla Higgins Averill

Introduction
• You are being asked to participate in a research study that intends to broadly document how staff at the Robey school have implemented SAI/RTI.
• You were selected as a possible participant because you have an important and valuable perspective to offer on the SAI/RTI implementation process.
• The researcher asks that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to participate.

Purpose of the Study:
• The purpose of this study is to better understand the factors that influence how a school implements RTI as part of a district-level change effort.
• You are being asked to participate in this study because you have a valuable perspective on the changes that have occurred at the Robey.
• The results of this research may be presented at meetings or in published articles.

Description of the Study Procedures:
• If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to participate in one 45-60 minute individual interviews during which you will be asked to discuss certain aspects of SAI implementation, which may include how structural decisions were made, how it has affected your work and philosophies, how it could be improved, etc.
• If you agree to be in this study, I will also ask you to participate in a 60-minute focus group, occurring approximately 4 months from now, during which you will be asked to review some of the initial findings from this study and clarify or add to the perspectives you shared during your individual interviews.
• Eight school-based educational professionals will be recruited for this study.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in the Study:
• Questions asked during the study or findings resulting from this study that might suggest that SAI is not operating as planned could be discouraging to you.
• This study may include other risks that are unknown at this time.
Benefits of Being in the Study:

- As the Robey school has been implementing SAI since September 2010, the researcher hopes to gain a sense for what factors have influenced how the school has constructed and implemented SAI. The research findings might inform your future work, e.g., the researcher will share these findings with WPS, who in turn may modify or improve district-level structures in response to the findings.
- You will probably not get any direct benefit from participating in this study. You may appreciate having an opportunity to express your opinion and indirectly provide feedback on how you feel SAI has been implemented, but the researcher cannot guarantee that you will receive any direct benefit from this study. However, the researcher hopes that the information gathered in this study will help WPS and the Robey better serve its students.

Payments:

- You will receive a $10 Dunkin Donuts gift card for participating in this study. You will receive the $10 Dunkin Donuts gift card if your participation in the study is discontinued at any point, for any reason.

Costs:

- There is no cost to you to participate in this research study.

Confidentiality:

- In any sort of report she may publish, the researcher will take all reasonable efforts to keep your responses and your identity confidential. Unique identifiers or a special code will be assigned to each participant’s responses. Research records will be kept in a locked file.
- Records that identify you and the consent form signed by you may be looked at by the Boston College IRB or by Federal Agencies overseeing human subject research.
- You will have an opportunity to review anything the researcher writes that involves a description of your statements or your work. If you have concerns about the accuracy or potential impact of any writing, the researcher will address your concerns and modify what she has written.
- This research study will identify prominent and shared themes related to what is occurring within a school. Given this analytic style, it is much easier to preserve the confidentiality of the source of any comment or action because this point of view will be shared by a number of other persons.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal:

- Your participation is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, it will not affect your current or future relations with your school. You need not answer every question that the researcher poses, for whatever reasons.
- You are free to withdraw your participation at any time, for any reason.
- There is no penalty or loss of benefits for not taking part or for stopping your participation.
• The researcher may withdraw a participant from the study if the participant has been unable to comply with the study requirements.

Contacts and Questions:
• The researcher conducting this study is Orla Higgins Averill, a Ph.D. candidate in the Curriculum & Instruction program at the Lynch School of Education at Boston College. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her at: 617-610-1033 or via email at: orlahiggins@gmail.com
• If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact: Director, Office for Research Protections, Boston College at (617) 552-4778, or irb@bc.edu

Copy of Consent Form:
• You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records and future reference.

Statement of Consent:
• I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to participate in this study. I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.
• I understand the possible risks and benefits of this study. I know that participating in this study is voluntary. I choose to participate in this study.

Signatures/Dates:

_______ Check here if you will allow the researcher to audio record your interviews.

_______ Check here if you do not want to have your interviews audio recorded.

_____________________________
Date __________________________

Consent Signature of Participant

_____________________________
Print Name of Participant

EMAIL ADDRESS: ___________________________
Appendix C

Following is the interview protocol I used.7

**Background**

Introduction: So as you know, I’m still working on my PhD at Boston College. I’m working on my dissertation, which looks at how the Robey has implemented SAI over the past 2+ years. I want to get a sense of how SAI has developed at the Robey and your perception of key factors that have influenced its implementation. Your position as a teacher (principal) at a cohort 1 school will offer a particularly useful perspective. So I will start with some background questions that I’m asking everybody:

- What is your position in the district? How long have you been in this role? Years teaching? Years at this school? Grade level/subject(s)? Do you have a teaching credential? Are you teaching in the subject area for which you are certified?
- Describe the community the the Robey serves.
- Tell me a little about the students that you teach. Do you believe that all students can achieve at grade level if they have enough support?
- Tell me a little about the Robey. Do you enjoy working here?
- What was your background or understanding of RTI before your school started implementing SAI? In other words, did you have any prior knowledge of the RTI model?

**Process of Implementation**

Transition: So we are in the third year of SAI implementation. Now I want to spend some time talking about how SAI implementation has gone so far.

A. **Adoption of the RTI model**

- How did SAI/RTI implementation happen here?
- How much input did classroom teachers have in the decision to adopt SAI/RTI?
- What was teachers’ initial reaction to SAI (e.g., enthusiasm, resistance)?
- How did the SAI/RTI model fit with the culture of the school (as it was)?
- Does the the SAI/RTI model and goals fit with your vision or philosophies of education and styles of teaching? Why or why not?

B. **Implementation of the RTI model**

- Describe what was done (a) initially and (b) an ongoing basis to prepare the faculty for the implementation of SAI/RTI.
  - Probe: Do you have the resources needed to implement SAI/RTI?
- What professional development was provided around SAI/RTI?
- Describe some of the feelings you have had during the implementation of RTI.

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7 This protocol was developed with assistance from Professor Amanda Datnow of the University of California San Diego, who has conducted extensive research on the implementation of educational reform.
Probe: Give an example of something that created positive or negative emotions in you. (e.g., a meeting, interactions with other teachers, students, parents, administrators)

- What changes has the Robey school made to facilitate the implementation of this model?
  - Probe: Do you receive extra planning time daily or on a regular basis?
  - Probe: Have there been changes in the schedule? If yes, how?
- What changes have you made in your classroom to facilitate implementation of the model?
  - Probe: What adaptations have you made to suit your students? Your own preferences?
- What factors have supported SAI implementation? What factors have hindered implementation?
- What other factors have influenced implementation? (e.g., community partners, parents, staff turnover).
- What did the district envision for SAI? Does the Robey’s SAI/RTI model fit with that?

Results of Implementation

Transition: SAI has asked everyone involved do his/her work in a different way. Now I want to talk a little about how things in the school have changed because of SAI/RTI.

- Tell me a little about how the SAI/RTI model works here. Describe how the Robey has implemented tiered interventions, team-based structures and assessment as part of SAI/RTI.
- What changes have taken place in the Robey school as a whole? Changes in school culture and climate? School structure? Decision-making?
- What changes have taken place in your classroom?
- Has SAI/RTI changed the way you work with your colleagues?
  - Probe: Since SAI implementation began, have you found yourself going to colleagues for advice or to talk about instruction?
- Has SAI caused you think about your students differently? Has it changed the way you think about what they are capable of achieving?
- What is the best and worst thing that has happened in the school because of SAI?

Wrap-up

Transition: I have a couple of final questions.

- Imagine you are on the phone with another teacher whose school is considering implementing RTI. What advice would you give her?
- Do you think SAI/RTI will last? Why or why not?
Appendix D

Following is the RTI symbolic incident recall I posed to all participants:

Now I’m going to ask you to recall an incident that, for you, symbolizes what RTI is all about here at the Robey. I want you to think about how that incident occurred, including your role in the incident, what you were thinking and feeling about the incident, and the outcome of the incident. *(Time was provided so that the participant could think about the question).* Okay, please describe the incident.

**Probes included:**

- How were you feeling / How did you feel?
- Can you be more specific?
- Why is this symbolic of what RTI is all about?
Appendix E

Below is the list of sensitizing concepts on which I reflected following each observation.

• Use of data
• Problem solving process
• Collaboration
• Instruction
• Intervention
• Progress monitoring
• Goal setting
• Group roles and norms