The Impact of a "Response to Intervention" Initiative on Teachers' Efficacy with Students of Color in a Voluntary Desegregation Program

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THE IMPACT OF A
“RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION” INITIATIVE
ON TEACHERS’ EFFICACY
WITH STUDENTS OF COLOR
IN A VOLUNTARY DESEGREGATION PROGRAM

Dissertation
by

CHRISTINE M. FRANCIS

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2009

The Impact of a “Response to Intervention” Initiative

on Teachers’ Efficacy

with Students of Color

in a Voluntary Desegregation Program

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Abstract

The Impact of a “Response to Intervention” Initiative on Teachers’ Efficacy with Students of Color in a Voluntary Desegregation Program

This qualitative case study focused on a Response to Intervention (RTI) literacy initiative in a suburban elementary school near an urban area in New England. The initiative incorporated professional development about RTI and implementation of components of an RTI model. The participant-researcher analyzed teachers’ feedback regarding the professional development and the RTI model, as the initiative developed, with a specific focus on the teachers’ perceptions about the impact of the initiative on the school’s capacity to effectively instruct urban students of color who are participants in a voluntary desegregation program.

The professional development about RTI incorporated three features which are recommended for professional learning communities: content which is research-based, process which includes reflection and dialogue, and context which is job-embedded. The RTI model utilized the “problem-solving” approach, and incorporated progress-monitoring and interventions.

The findings from the study indicated that the combination of three elements (sustained professional development about RTI, implementation of RTI in the school setting, and conversations and questions about addressing the needs of urban students of color) resulted in increased teacher confidence in their ability to provide effective instruction to this population of students. Further, the interaction of these three elements resulted in identification of next steps which the teachers believe will specifically address these students’ needs. However, several teachers questioned whether RTI was adequate to address the complex issues of students of color in a voluntary desegregation program.
They recognized that they needed more information about effective instructional strategies to match the learning profiles of this population of students.

Combining the results of this case study with the recommendations of the professional literature about culturally responsive teaching, it appears that Response to Intervention has the potential to address the learning needs of urban students of color, but only if practitioners incorporate some basic principles of culturally responsive teaching. Integrating the results of this study with the professional literature about Response to Intervention, culturally responsive teaching, and effective professional development, the participant-researcher recommends that policymakers and educators should consider incorporating culturally responsive teaching into their RTI models in order to truly make RTI effective for addressing the achievement gap. Further, the researcher recommends that schools should provide sustained professional development (with content based upon research, process which includes reflection and dialogue, and context which is job-embedded) to increase teachers’ understanding about Response to Intervention and about culturally responsive teaching.
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Chapter One: Overview of the Study

Introduction

Response to Intervention, or RTI, recently has become a popular model utilized to address the needs of struggling learners. Its proponents cite federal legislation and social science literature as justification for its implementation. It is a major component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004), which permits districts to use as much as 15% of federal Special Education funds for early intervention. This act specifies that, for the purpose of determining that a child has a learning disability, a school may implement a procedure which documents how a child responds to interventions as part of its evaluation process (Bender & Shores 2007, p. 1).

Response to Intervention serves two main purposes: providing early intervention to all children at risk for school failure and identifying children with learning disabilities. It was included in IDEA 2004 as a result of increasing costs of special education and general dissatisfaction with the IQ-achievement discrepancy model, which is criticized as a “wait-to-fail” approach. However, there are many questions and issues regarding RTI. Bender and Shores (2007) contend that it has been untested for effectiveness in determining eligibility for special education, but there is evidence for use of RTI as a progress-monitoring tool for all students, with or without disabilities (p. 1). Additionally, there are questions as to whether RTI is adequate and appropriate for students from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds.

There is general agreement that an achievement gap exists in the nation’s schools. As educators embrace Response to Intervention, it will be important to determine its effectiveness in addressing this gap. According to Geneva Gay (2000), “conventional
paradigms and proposals for improving the achievement of students of color are doomed to failure” (p. 12). As asserted by Klinger and Edwards (2006), when evaluating RTI instruction and interventions, “it is essential to find out what works with whom, by whom, and in what contexts” (p. 108).

As teachers embark upon the journey of applying RTI structures to their repertoire and more effectively addressing the achievement gap, they should be provided with significant support through professional development. There are many forms of professional development for teachers. Recently, the creation of professional learning communities has been advocated as a way to provide meaningful ongoing training and support for teachers. This project incorporated several of the staff development elements recommended for a professional learning community and assessed their effectiveness with teachers as they developed RTI structures and collaborated to address the achievement gap.

**Statement of the Problem**

Beech School was an elementary school in an upper-middle-class New England suburb located seven miles from a major city. The school enrolled 300 students, Grades Kindergarten through 4, and consisted of fifteen self-contained “inclusion” classrooms, three classrooms per grade-level. The school population was largely white (over seventy-seven percent), with Asian students (nine percent) being the next largest ethnic group. The school district was a member of Urban Partners, a voluntary integration program by which inner city children have an opportunity to attend school in the suburbs. Beech School enrolled approximately fifteen (five percent of the student population) of these students each year. Almost all of these students were African-American.
The vast majority of Beech School students were very successful, making excellent progress each year and performing well on state tests. However, many of the school’s Urban Partners students were not achieving at the same rate or performing as well on the state-wide tests. Many had been the subject of TAT (Teacher Assistance Team) discussions, and some had been referred for Special Education evaluations. In the middle of the 2006-07 school year, four of the fifteen UP students (27 percent) were on IEPs (Individual Education Plans), compared with 9 percent of the total school population. State-wide test results indicated a disproportionately high number of UP students in the NI (Needs Improvement) or W (Warning) categories.

In late January 2007, classroom teachers submitted the names of all students about whom they were considering retention. Six names were submitted. All of these students were in Kindergarten or Grade 1 (two from Kindergarten and four from Grade 1). Four of them (two from K and two from Grade 1) were new UP students; they were the only new UP students enrolled in 2006-07. Therefore, all of the new UP students were being considered for retention! Further, two-thirds of the students being considered for retention were new UP students. To summarize, the Urban Partners students were not performing as well as the other students, and they were disproportionately represented in Special Education and in discussions regarding grade-retention.

As was the case in many cities and towns, this school district was expending considerable effort on helping struggling learners be successful. Classroom teachers were employing many best practices to differentiate instruction for students with a variety of learning profiles. There were structures in place which provided support to teachers as they strove to help all students reach grade-level curriculum goals. In some cases,
students received additional support from specialists (reading specialist, special education teacher, speech and language teacher, occupational therapist, etc.). However, some students did not qualify for these services, yet they were in need of instructional interventions. Many of the UP students were in the category of students who would have benefitted from instructional interventions but who were not eligible for special education services.

Concurrent with these issues, the school system was striving to keep costs down, especially in the area of Special Education. The district sought to expand its options to help struggling learners by developing additional interventions without incurring additional costs. Therefore, the district was initiating a “Response to Intervention” plan, to be developed and implemented over the course of several years. During the 2007-08 school year, the district-wide focus for Response to Intervention (RTI) was in Kindergarten. The plan was being developed by the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, the Director of Special Education, and the four elementary principals. To introduce the initiative, an article about Response to Intervention was shared with all elementary teachers during staff meetings in 2006-07. To provide information for the development of the plan, administrators and specialists reviewed literature about RTI, and the Language Arts specialists from each school visited a school in a nearby city, to observe RTI in action. The K-12 Director of Language Arts and the elementary Language Arts specialists were involved in further development of the plan, which focused on the subject of literacy. The Beech School principal worked with the other administrators and specialists to develop the system-wide pilot of RTI in Kindergarten during the spring and summer of 2007.
The Project

The participant-researcher, as principal, led the RTI initiative at Beech School. Kindergarten teachers participated in the district-wide plan and the school-wide plan. Grades 1 – 4 teachers participated only in the school-wide plan. All of Beech School’s teachers (Grades K- 4) participated in study groups, involving only teachers at the school, as part of the school-wide initiative. They utilized elements of a Professional Learning Community format as they read and discussed articles about RTI and developed and revised the school’s RTI model throughout the year. Kindergarten teachers also experienced the benefit of professional development offered by the district, as part of the district-wide initiative.

In addition to fifteen classroom teachers, staff members included two part-time special education teachers (a total of 1.0 FTE), one Language Arts specialist, one part-time Speech teacher, seven full-time or part-time classroom aides who focused on special education students in Grades 1 - 4, two classroom assistants shared among the three half-day Kindergarten classes, a part-time guidance counselor, a part-time psychologist, a full-time nurse, a part-time library aide, and part-time Art, Music, and Physical Education teachers. The staff at this school recently had developed and implemented a Language Arts Assessment Framework to improve their consistency and communication regarding literacy assessment.

Each year, the school received new UP students, usually new Kindergarteners, and occasionally new First or Second Grade students. For the 2007-08 school year, three new UP students (two Kindergarteners and one First Grader) were enrolled.
The Beech School’s 2007-08 School Improvement Plan included the following action steps, which were related to the RTI initiative:

- Pilot “Response to Intervention” model, as part of the system-wide initiative in Kindergarten
- Apply “Response to Intervention” structures to Grades 1 – 4
- Connect Language Arts assessments to “Response to Intervention”
- Use DIBELS phonics assessments in Kindergarten (Fall, Winter, Spring)
- Conduct “Response to Intervention” study groups

The initiative at Beech School involved the following components:

1. The participant-researcher collaborated with the school’s Kindergarten teachers, Language Arts Specialist, and Special Education teacher to pilot the “Response to Intervention” model, as part of the system-wide initiative in Kindergarten. (Fall 2007 - Spring 2008). The system-wide initiative included administration of the DIBELS phonics assessments in fall, winter, and spring. The district provided training and conducted follow-up meetings with the Kindergarten teachers, Language Arts Specialist, and Special Education teacher regarding the use of DIBELS to assess, to analyze results, and to plan interventions. Each school was responsible for developing its own “Response to Intervention” model at Kindergarten, utilizing the data from the DIBELS assessments.

2. The participant-researcher led the RTI initiative in Grades 1 – 4 at this school. (The other schools in the district planned to extend RTI to Grades 1 – 4 in future years. At this school, the teachers expressed interest in implementing RTI at all
grade-levels. Therefore, RTI was incorporated into the School Improvement Plan.) The participant-researcher conducted study groups and gave presentations about RTI during staff meetings. This initiative involved members of the entire faculty (Grades K-4), as teachers began to apply elements of RTI, incorporating the recently-developed Language Arts Assessment Framework. Throughout the year, the staff revised and refined a model of RTI, as they learned more about RTI and implemented various elements in their work with struggling students.

3. The participant-researcher facilitated specific applications of RTI at all grades (K-4). For example, class TAT (Teacher Assistance Team) meetings were held for all classes, in the fall and spring. During each class TAT meeting, classroom teachers shared information about students, including assessment data and interventions which were being used with struggling learners. This information was used to monitor students’ progress and to plan interventions as needed.

4. The participant-researcher collected staff feedback and other information about the RTI initiatives (both the system-wide Kindergarten initiative and the school-based K-4 initiative). This information was incorporated into the school’s RTI model as it was revised and refined throughout the year.

**Focus of the Study**

For this study, the participant-researcher analyzed how the structures and strategies of the RTI approach influenced the teachers’ perceptions of their capacity to help UP students achieve grade-level curriculum expectations. Further, the researcher analyzed the elements of the process which helped the staff develop and implement the RTI model.
Throughout the project, the researcher conducted a study of the effect that the RTI initiative had on teachers’ perceptions of their efficacy with UP students. At the beginning of the study, she administered a questionnaire to collect data regarding the following five topics:

- their knowledge about Response to Intervention,
- the extent to which the school was addressing the needs of struggling readers,
- the reasons some students had difficulty learning to read,
- possible solutions to address the issue of struggling readers, and
- various forms of professional development.

During the study, she collected additional data to track changes in the teachers’ thoughts on these topics. At the end of the study, the researcher administered a follow-up questionnaire to determine the ways in which perceptions had changed and to study the components of the model and the professional development which appeared to help this population of students.

**Research Questions**

The research questions were:

1. To what extent did each professional development component of the RTI initiative influence teachers’:
   
   a. implementation of the RTI approach?
   
   b. perceptions of their efficacy with struggling Urban Partners students?

2. Which components of the RTI model did teachers:

   a. Use during participation in the RTI initiative?
b. Identify as being effective with struggling Urban Partners students?

3. How did participating in the Response to Intervention initiative affect teachers’ perceptions of their efficacy with struggling Urban Partners students?

**Theoretical Rationale**

There were three areas of educational research and literature which formed the background for this study: *Response to Intervention, culturally responsive teaching,* and *professional development in a professional learning community.* In addition, the literature on *qualitative analysis* informed the procedures utilized during the study.

The first theme, *Response to Intervention,* or RTI, recently has become a popular model utilized to address the needs of struggling learners. Its proponents cite federal legislation and social science literature as justification for its implementation. It is a major component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004), which permits districts to use as much as 15% of federal Special Education funds for early intervention. This act specifies that, for the purpose of determining that a child has a learning disability, a school may implement a procedure which documents how a child responds to interventions as part of its evaluation process (Bender & Shores 2007, p. 1).

Response to Intervention is a method which employs a tiered model of instruction for all students. For example, in a three-tier model, Tier 1 involves all students receiving instruction in the core curriculum; data is collected on all students three times each year. In Tier 2, students (approximately 15%) who do not respond adequately to the core curriculum, receive supplemental instruction; data is collected more frequently. In Tier 3, students (approximately 5%) who do not respond to the combination of the core
curriculum and the Tier 2 interventions receive daily intensive intervention; progress is monitored weekly. Students who do not respond to these interventions are considered for Special Education evaluation. (Project MP3, Center for Promoting Research to Practice)

Some applications of RTI employ two or four tiers. Others have three tiers, but structure each tier differently than the example given.

Response to Intervention serves two main purposes: providing early intervention to all children at risk for school failure and identifying children with learning disabilities. As described by Fuchs and Fuchs (2006), the R in RTI refers to students’ responsiveness to instruction and intervention, according to norm-referenced or criterion-referenced measures. Children are assessed regularly after periods of instruction and intervention, thus providing data which educators can use both to design early intervention and to identify special needs students. The I in RTI refers to multi-tiered interventions, utilizing either the “problem-solving approach” or the “standard protocol approach”. Different versions of RTI utilize two to four tiers of instruction, becoming more intensive as students move up the tiers. The interventions serve both purposes of RTI: to provide early intervention and to identify special needs students. Stated another way, RTI is a “systematic and data-based method for identifying, defining, and resolving students’ academic and/or behavioral difficulties” (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005, p. 2).

RTI was included in IDEA 2004 as a result of increasing costs of special education and general dissatisfaction with the IQ-achievement discrepancy model, which is criticized as a “wait-to-fail” approach. Special education is “moving rapidly away from a system that prioritizes finding and labeling children and toward one that prevents
learning and behavior problems by attending more to effective interventions and to how students respond to those interventions” (Prasse, 2006, p. 14).

Despite its increasing popularity, there are many questions and issues regarding RTI. The earliest research on the RTI process began in the 1960s. However, only in recent years has the process received considerable attention from researchers and practitioners. Bender and Shores (2007) contend that it has been untested for effectiveness in determining eligibility for special education, but there is evidence for use of RTI as a progress-monitoring tool for all students, with or without disabilities (p. 1). Further, they assert that many practitioners have not had direct experience with RTI because few states have developed methods for implementing the new federal regulations, which went into effect in August 2006 (p. 4). Finally, these studies have not examined whether RTI is adequate and appropriate for students from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds.

The second theme for this study was *culturally responsive teaching*. There is general agreement that an achievement gap exists in the nation’s schools. This study sought to analyze participants’ capacity to address this gap, specifically as it related to early reading achievement among urban African-American students who attended largely white suburban elementary schools. The participant-researcher studied the extent to which the teachers observed differences between the largely white students who lived in the town and the predominately African-American students who were in the Urban Partners program.

According to Geneva Gay (2000), *culturally responsive teaching* can be defined as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and
performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 29). Gay makes a compelling argument, supported by research, for improving student achievement through curriculum and instruction which directly respond to the cultural diversity in society and in our schools. Culture plays a critical role in relation to student attitudes and achievement. It is imperative that teachers “understand how their own and their students’ cultures affect the educational process” (9). Culturally responsive teaching validates and affirms the cultural heritage of diverse ethnic groups. It teaches the whole child. It encompasses curriculum content, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments. Gay (2000) describes it as being empowering, transformative and liberating since it enables students to be more successful learners, explicitly respecting the cultures and experiences of ethnically diverse learners, freeing them from reliance on mainstream knowledge and methods of learning (pp. 29 – 36).

Culturally responsive teaching is comprised of four key elements: teacher attitudes and expectations, cultural communication in the classroom, culturally diverse content in the curriculum, and culturally congruent instructional strategies. Teachers need to convey the message that they care about and set high expectations for ethnically diverse students. They need to appreciate the importance of language in the learning process; as Gay contends, “languages and communication styles are systems of cultural notations and the means through which thoughts and ideas are expressively embodied” (p. 81). Teachers must utilize curriculum content which is culturally diverse. Ethnically diverse students need to feel empowered through academic success, cultural affiliation and personal efficacy. “Knowledge in the form of curriculum content is central to this
empowerment” (p. 111). Finally, teachers must match their instructional strategies to the learning styles of these students. Gay states, “Establishing congruity between different aspects of the learning processes of ethnically diverse students and the instructional strategies used by classroom teachers is essential to improving their academic achievement” (p. 148).

Gay asserts that “conventional paradigms and proposals for improving the achievement of students of color are doomed to failure” (p. 12). She cites several high-profile innovations which appear to have a positive impact on the achievement of minority students, but questions their long-term effectiveness (p. 12). Beech School was implementing an RTI model utilizing conventional RTI resources. The participant-researcher examined the effects of this model against the background of culturally responsive teaching, using Geneva Gay’s work as a significant resource.

Other resources, such as *Addressing the over-representation of African American students in special education: The prereferral intervention process* (NABSE, 2002), informed the researcher as she analyzed the structure of the school’s Response to Intervention model. This study analyzed teachers’ views about struggling readers and about the model’s relative effectiveness with the general population and with Urban Partners students. As asserted by Klinger and Edwards (2006), when evaluating RTI instruction and interventions, “it is essential to find out what works with whom, by whom, and in what contexts” (p. 108).

The third theme of this study was professional development in a professional learning community. There are many forms of staff development for teachers. This project incorporated elements of staff development recommended for professional
learning communities. These elements consider the *content, process, and context*
standards of the National Staff Development Council (2001).

In a professional learning community, the *content* of a staff development program
is based on research. Relevant background information and current thinking about the
topic are gathered in order to ensure that the innovation “makes a difference in teacher
effectiveness and the success of students” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 263). The staff
development program becomes a vehicle to make connections between research and
practice. The RTI initiative incorporated current information from the legal and social
science literature about Response to Intervention; the study asked teachers to assess the
extent to which this content contributed to the project in a positive way.

In a professional learning community, the *process* of staff development results in
reflection and dialogue. Staff development programs are “designed to develop thoughtful
professionals who have the ability to assess and revise their own actions in order to
improve the likelihood of success for their students” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 265).
This project included opportunities for reflection and dialogue, since “creating small,
supportive groups in which teachers are encouraged to discuss their questions, concerns,
and ideas about a new program also enhances the successful implementation of a
program” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 266).

In a professional learning community, the *context* of staff development is job-
embedded. In contrast to the belief that educators learn through off-site training sessions,
this view focuses on staff development within the daily work of educators. “Teachers are
engaging in a powerful form of staff development each time they work together to
develop curriculum and assessment strategies; engage in the ongoing cycle of inquiry,
reflection, dialogue, action, analysis, and adjustments in order to improve results; and give one another feedback as they practice new skills” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 273). Throughout the RTI initiative, teachers participated in staff development offered during school-wide staff meetings, on district-wide curriculum days, and during meetings which occurred during the school day.

Marzano (2003) contends that the school-level factor of “collegiality and professionalism” has an important impact on student achievement (p. 60). This factor concerns the manner in which teachers interact with each other and the extent to which they approach their work as professionals. It emphasizes conditions by which teachers may continually increase their content and pedagogical knowledge (pp. 60 – 64). He recommends action steps to: establish norms of conduct and behavior conducive to collegiality and professionalism; establish governance structures that encourage teacher involvement in decisions and policies; and engage teachers in meaningful professional development activities (p. 65). Hill and Crevola (1999) include Professional Learning Teams on their Design for Improving Student Outcomes (Figure 6.1, p. 123). They maintain that “professional learning is most powerful when it occurs within the context of teachers working as members of a team and in pursuit of specific learning outcomes for students” (p. 130). Hargreaves (2003) describes Professional Learning Communities as structures which transform knowledge, encourage shared inquiry, are informed by evidence, embrace uncertainty, utilize local solutions, encourage joint responsibility, develop continuous learning, and promote communities of practice (pp. 184 & 185). The staff development components of the RTI initiative incorporated elements of these
structures; the study evaluated teachers’ beliefs about the value of these elements in relation to the success of the initiative.

**Significance of the Study**

This initiative was important to study because it appears that schools are not adequately meeting the instructional needs of Urban Partners students, many of whom struggle with the town’s grade-level expectations. Other communities in this metropolitan area struggle with the issue of an achievement gap with respect to students in the UP program. In a broader context, the achievement gap between majority and minority students has received national attention and has national implications. It is incumbent upon all educators to identify the factors to which we can attribute this dilemma and to determine appropriate interventions to address it. Students who do not find success in school often drop out and are, therefore, less likely to have successful lives and contribute to society. There are serious implications for the future of our nation if our educational system is not able to address this issue.

In order to close the achievement gap, educators need to ensure that minority students have ample opportunity to learn. Marzano (2003) argues, “Opportunity to learn (OTL) has the strongest relationship with student achievement of all school-level factors” (p. 22). The RTI model employs elements of this viewpoint regarding opportunity to learn because it provides struggling learners with increasing amounts of learning opportunities focused on their needs. Further, the model provides frequent monitoring of student progress and adjustment of instruction in response to student achievement. However, several authors suggest that such a model will not go far enough to give adequate opportunity to learn to minority students. For example, Starratt (2003) takes
“opportunity to learn” a step further, stating that it can involve many variables, including linguistic and cultural ones: “If the instruction does not account for these variables, then it does not provide all students with an opportunity to learn” (p. 300). Gay (2000) states “culture is at the heart of all we do in the name of education” (p. 8) and underscores “the importance of placing culture at the center of the analysis of techniques for improving the performance of underachieving students of color” (pp. 9 & 10). Klinger and Edwards (2006) emphasize that, when evaluating RTI models, “we must ensure that children have received culturally responsive, appropriate, quality instruction that is evidence based….and validated with students like those with whom it was applied” (p. 109); otherwise we cannot claim that they have had adequate opportunity to learn. They contend that RTI efforts need to incorporate these considerations.

Since many districts are adopting Response to Intervention methods, it is important to evaluate whether the model provides adequate opportunity to learn for all of its students. There have been several recent studies about the RTI approach; however, the results have been inconclusive. Further, these studies have not examined whether RTI itself is adequate for students from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds.

**Research Design**

The study employed qualitative research methodology and an evaluative case study approach. As described by Merriam (1998), qualitative research includes several essential characteristics: an interest in understanding the meaning people have constructed about their world; the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; fieldwork; an inductive research strategy; and a “richly descriptive” product
The qualitative research methodology is appropriate because this study endeavored to determine teachers’ perceptions of the impact of a new initiative on their efficacy with a specific population of students.

Merriam (1998) defines a case as “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 27). Miles and Huberman (1994) define a case as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 25). The latter authors state that a case can be a sustained process (1994, p. 26). For this study, the case was the process of the RTI initiative, taking place within a single school year.

Merriam (1998) claims, “case study is a particularly suitable design if you are interested in process” (p. 33) and states that evaluative case studies involve “description, explanation, and judgment” (p. 39). This was an evaluative case study because it evaluated the process of a new initiative, describing it, explaining it, and making judgments about it.

Data collection was conducted with consideration of reliability, validity and researcher-bias (the participant-researcher was the project leader). The researcher administered pre-intervention and post-intervention questionnaires (one in January and one in June) to the purposive sample of teachers, to determine what they perceived as the reasons the Urban Partners students were struggling, their perceptions of their capacity to help these students succeed, their beliefs about the effectiveness of various forms of professional development, and their thoughts on successful interventions. The researcher conducted a focus group discussion with all participants in March, using questions designed to gather follow-up data after the initial survey. This discussion served the purpose of gathering data in the middle of the project. She conducted an individual
interview with each participant in April. The study participants submitted reflections after each step in the initiative. The researcher triangulated the data from these sources and kept notes and artifacts regarding the initiative as it progressed.

Many staff members were involved in the RTI initiative. A smaller subset of staff members was directly involved in the study. Participants in the initiative (from which the study sample was drawn) included all fifteen of the classroom teachers (three each at each grade-level, Kindergarten through Grade 4), one Special Education Teacher, one Language Arts Specialist, one Speech and Language Pathologist, and the Principal (who is also the researcher).

The participants in the study were a purposeful sample of the initiative participants. A cohort of ten staff members comprised the sample. Seven study participants were classroom teachers, representing a range of grades (K-4), with teaching experience ranging from three to thirty years. Three of these teachers taught Grades 3 & 4, three taught Grades 1 & 2, and one was a Kindergarten teacher. The remaining three were the Language Arts Specialist, one Special Education teacher, and the principal (the participant-researcher).

All participants were volunteers. Their real names have not been used in any reports; all their responses were kept confidential. They were given an informed consent form, detailing the purpose of the study, the data gathering activities, the voluntary nature of the study, provisions for confidentiality, assurances that they could withdraw at any time, and a statement that their participation or withdrawal would not affect their standing at the school in any way. The form explicitly stated that they would receive no compensation or other tangible benefits as a result of their participation in this study.
Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations to this study. First, because of the small number of teachers and of UP students, we can’t assume that the results will apply to all similar situations. Second, this school was developing the RTI model during the project. The initiative was in its first year in the district; therefore the results cannot be generalized to models which are fully developed. Also, the researcher was the project leader and the principal of the school. Therefore, it is possible that teacher responses were affected by the fact that the researcher was also their supervisor and evaluator.

Overview of the Study

This first chapter provides an introduction to the study. Chapter Two will provide an overview of the relevant literature which informed the project and the study. Chapter Three will present the overall research design. Chapter Four will present the findings of the study. Chapter Five will summarize the findings, relate them to relevant research and theory, and synthesize the implications of the results.
Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

Introduction

This chapter will present a review of the bodies of literature which are related to the topic under study. There are three areas of educational research and literature which formed the background for this study: Response to Intervention, culturally responsive teaching, and professional development within a professional learning community. In addition, the literature on qualitative analysis informed the procedures utilized during the study. The latter will be addressed in Chapter Three.

Response to Intervention

Response to Intervention, or RTI, recently has become a popular model utilized to address the needs of struggling learners. The Harvard Education Letter included an article in its January/February 2007 issue which described RTI as a “new approach to reading instruction (which) aims to catch struggling readers early” (Walser, 2007, p. 1). RTI proponents cite federal legislation and social science literature as justification for its implementation. It is a major component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004), which permits districts to use as much as 15% of federal Special Education funds for early intervention. This act specifies that, for the purpose of determining that a child has a learning disability, a school may implement a procedure which documents how a child responds to interventions as part of its evaluation process (Bender & Shores, 2007, p. 1). Several states have developed their own RTI models, some incorporating three tiers of intervention, others with as many as six tiers (Bender & Shores, 2007, p. 23).
Response to Intervention serves two main purposes: 1) to provide early intervention for all children at risk for school failure and 2) to identify children with learning disabilities. As described by Fuchs and Fuchs (2006), the “R” in RTI refers to students’ responsiveness to instruction and intervention, according to norm-referenced or criterion-referenced measures. Children are assessed regularly after periods of instruction and intervention, thus providing data which educators can use both to design early intervention and to identify special needs students. The “I” in RTI refers to multi-tiered interventions, utilizing either the “problem-solving approach” or the “standard treatment protocol approach”. Various versions of RTI utilize three to six tiers of instruction, becoming more intensive as students move up the tiers. The interventions serve both purposes of RTI: to provide early intervention and to identify special needs students. Stated another way, RTI is a “systematic and data-based method for identifying, defining, and resolving students’ academic and/or behavioral difficulties” (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005, p. 2).

RTI was included in IDEA 2004 as a result of increasing costs of special education and general dissatisfaction with the IQ-achievement discrepancy model, which is criticized as a “wait-to-fail” approach. Special education is “moving rapidly away from a system that prioritizes finding and labeling children and toward one that prevents learning and behavior problems by attending more to effective interventions and to how students respond to those interventions” (Prasse, 2006, p. 14).

Despite its increasing popularity, there are many questions and issues regarding RTI. The earliest research on the RTI process began in the 1960s. However, only in recent years has the process received considerable attention from researchers and
practitioners. Bender and Shores (2007) contend that it has been untested for effectiveness in determining eligibility for special education, but there is evidence for use of RTI as a progress-monitoring tool for all students, with or without disabilities (p. 1). Further, they point out that many practitioners have not had direct experience with RTI because few states have developed methods for implementing the new federal regulations, which went into effect in August 2006 (p. 4).

**Federal and State Laws and Regulations pertaining to RTI**

There are federal and state laws and regulations which pertain to intervention for students who struggle with early reading skills. At the federal level, there are general education and special education laws regarding intervention for students who struggle with early reading skills. With respect to general education, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) was enacted to improve the academic performance of all children and reduce the achievement gap. It focuses reading instruction on these five components: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. It includes provision for Reading First grants for schools whose students are not meeting reading standards. The stated purposes of these grants are:

1. To provide assistance to State educational agencies and local educational agencies in establishing reading programs for students in kindergarten through grade 3 that are based on scientifically based reading research, to ensure that every student can read at grade level or above not later than the end of grade 3.
2. To provide assistance to State educational agencies and local educational agencies in preparing teachers, including special education teachers, through professional development and other support, so the teachers can identify specific reading
barriers facing their students and so the teachers have the tools to effectively help their students learn to read.

(3) To provide assistance to State educational agencies and local educational agencies in selecting or administering screening, diagnostic, and classroom-based instructional reading assessments.

(4) To provide assistance to State educational agencies and local educational agencies in selecting or developing effective instructional materials (including classroom-based materials to assist teachers in implementing the essential components of reading instruction), programs, learning systems, and strategies to implement methods that have been proven to prevent or remediate reading failure within a State.

(5) To strengthen coordination among schools, early literacy programs, and family literacy programs to improve reading achievement for all children.

(NCLB, Section 1201(1-5)).

NCLB defines “scientifically-based research”, as “research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs”. (NCLB (20 U. S. C. 7801 (37)) Section 9101(37A)

Thus, NCLB promotes research-based reading programs and proven methods of preventing and remediating reading failure. Likewise, it promotes classroom-based instructional assessments to identify reading barriers, to measure how well students are reading, to monitor progress, and to improve reading achievement for all children. As emphasized by Stewart (2004), the law directly impacts classrooms which receive
Reading First funds, but also indirectly affects all others because of its various effects (eg. publishers create programs to meet these requirements) (p. 733).

With respect to special education laws and policy, in 2002, the President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education released a report which made three major recommendations:

- Focus on results, not process.
- Embrace models of prevention, not models of failure.
- Consider children with disabilities as general education children first. (Prasse 2006, p. 11)

In 2004, the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) presented significant changes from prior regulations regarding the identification of specific learning disabilities. Educators may now consider whether children respond to scientific, research-based interventions as part of evaluation procedures. Students who fail to respond to these interventions may be considered to have specific learning disabilities, and, therefore, be eligible for special education services (Russo, Osborne, & Borreca, 2005). Specifically, the law states:

A State must adopt, consistent with 34 CFR 300.309, criteria for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability as defined in 34 CFR 300.8(c)(10). In addition, 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).

A public agency must use the State criteria adopted pursuant to 34 CFR 300.307(a) 
in determining whether a child has a specific learning disability [34 CFR 300.307] 
[20 U.S.C. 1221e-3; 1401(30); 1414(b)(6)].

IDEA requires additional data “to ensure that underachievement in a child 
suspected of having a specific learning disability is not due to lack of appropriate 
instruction in reading or math” (IDEA Regulations, p. 3). The team must consider “data 
that demonstrate that prior to, or as part of, the referral process, the child was provided 
appropriate instruction in regular education settings, delivered by qualified personnel; 
and data-based documentation of repeated assessments of achievement at reasonable 
intervals, reflecting formal assessment of student progress during instruction” [34 CFR 
300.309] [20 U.S.C. 1221e-3; 1401(30); 1414(b)(6)]. (from website: Building the 
Legacy: IDEA 2004).

IDEA places specific emphasis on intervention, stating that its purpose is 
“providing incentives for whole-school approaches, scientifically-based early reading 
programs, positive behavioral interventions and supports, and early intervening services 
to reduce the need to label children in order to assess the learning and behavioral needs of 
such children” (20 U.S.C. 1400 (c) (5) (f)). This provision permits schools to spend up to 
15% of their federal special education funds on early intervening services designed to
help children before they are placed in special education services (Russo, Osborne, & Borreca, 2005).

To summarize, at the federal level, the current general education and special education laws (NCLB and IDEA) encourage whole-school approaches, regular assessments, and early intervention services to achieve success for all children. As Prasse (2006) concludes in his analysis of changes in general education and special education systems, “overlapping language and legal requirements….in federal legislation (NCLB and IDEA) demonstrate the intent to merge these systems” (p. 14). Clearly, the emphasis is on prevention of reading disabilities through interventions within the general education system. As Prasse (2006) vividly states, “The expectations of IDEA 2004 are clear: do not identify poor readers as having a disability if effective reading instruction and interventions have not been delivered” (p. 13).

Although the U.S. Department of Education permits the use of RTI as a means of identifying children with specific learning disabilities, each state, through the rules and regulations of its department of education, sets the specific definition of learning disabilities and the procedures for determining eligibility. An RTI approach is not required by the US DOE, but it prevents a state from precluding an RTI approach if a local district chooses to do so.

At the state level, in Massachusetts, the Department of Education Laws and Regulations for Special Education (603 CMR 28.00), as amended by the Board of Education on February 27, 2007, specify definitions for various disabilities, including autism, developmental delay, intellectual impairment, sensory impairment, neurological impairment, emotional impairment, communication impairment, physical impairment,
health impairment, and specific learning disability (603 CMR 28.02(7)). Specific
learning disability is defined as a “disorder in one or more of the basic psychological
processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may
manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do
mathematical calculations” (603 CMR 28.02(7j)). The regulation further specifies that
use of this term must “meet all federal requirements given in federal law at 34 CFR ss
300.8(c)(10) and 300.309” (603 CMR 28.02(7j)).

The law further specifies that, in order to be eligible for special education
services, a student must be “determined by a Team to have a disability(ies) and, as a
consequence, (be) unable to progress effectively in the general education program
without specially designed instruction or (be) unable to access the general curriculum
without a related service”; in determining eligibility, the school district must “thoroughly
evaluate and provide a narrative description of the student’s educational and
developmental potential” (603 CMR 28.02(9)). To “progress effectively in the general
education program” means to make “documented growth in the acquisition of knowledge
and skills, including social/emotional development, within the general education
program, with or without accommodations, according to chronological age and
developmental expectations, the individual educational potential of the student, and the
learning standards set forth in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks and the
curriculum of the district” (603 CMR 28.02(17)).

These state regulations indicate that the required assessments in an initial
evaluation include an assessment of all areas related to the suspected disability; a history
of the student’s educational progress in the general curriculum; an assessment of the
student’s attention skills, participation behaviors, communication skills, memory and social relations; and a narrative description of the student’s educational and developmental potential. The reports of these assessment results must include a summary of the procedures employed, the results, and the diagnostic impression, and must define the student’s needs and offer explicit means of meeting them (603 CMR 28.04(2)).

To summarize, the Massachusetts regulations, as amended in February 2007, define specific learning disabilities, provide guidelines for assessments based upon determining the needs of students, and refer to the federal laws, but do not specifically mention response to intervention or make specific references to intervention. While some states have included RTI in their guidelines, Massachusetts has not yet done so. However, the federal guidelines strongly encourage RTI; therefore local educational agencies in Massachusetts have flexibility in the ways they intervene for reading difficulties and determine reading disabilities. This analysis of the US and Massachusetts laws indicates that local school districts in Massachusetts may use a Response to Intervention approach to help children with reading difficulties and as part of its process to determine if children have specific learning disabilities which impact their ability to learn to read. Please note: The state regulations were further amended in August 2008. The above description represents the regulations as they existed at the time of the study.

**Essential Components of RTI Models**

The education and social science literature is producing a plethora of information about Response to Intervention, much of which applies to reading intervention. This literature contains descriptions of the essential components of RTI, including various models, structures, assessments, and interventions. This section will examine the
essential components, apply them to early reading intervention, and conclude with components and methodologies which appear to hold the greatest promise.

As envisioned by policymakers, Response to Intervention is designed to serve two main purposes: (a) encouraging and guiding educators to “intervene earlier on behalf of a greater number of children at risk for school failure” (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005, p. 57) and (b) providing a “more valid method of LD identification because early intervention will decrease the number of ‘false positives’ or students given a disability label who are low achievers because of poor instruction rather than an inherent disability” (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005, p. 57). With regards to the first purpose, the emphasis is on prevention of school failure among all children at risk, through early intervention. The second purpose focuses on improved identification of children with true learning disabilities, through systematic determination of a child’s responsiveness to instruction and interventions.

Brown-Chidsey & Steege (2005) enumerate three main components of RTI: high-quality instruction, frequent assessment, and data-based decision-making (p. 2). They state three “big ideas” about RTI methods:

- All children deserve effective instruction that leads to achieving functional skills.
- Continuous assessment leads to skill improvement
- Adjustments to instruction must be based on data. (p. 11)

In a recently released publication, Mellard and Johnson (2008) highlight the core requirements of a strong RTI model: (1) high-quality, research-based classroom instruction; (2) universal screening; (3) progress monitoring at all tiers; (4) research-based interventions at tiers 2 and 3; and (5) fidelity measures (pp. 4 – 6).
There are two distinct RTI models: the problem-solving model and the standard treatment protocol model. The structures of these models are similar, but the processes of determining and evaluating the results of the educational interventions are different. The problem-solving approach utilizes interventions designed for individual student needs. For each child, the assessments and interventions are personalized. By contrast, the standard treatment protocol approach involves interventions designed for small groups of students experiencing the same academic problem. The treatment usually involves a specific program delivered in small groups or individually for a fixed amount of time.

Both models require three basic elements: interventions which are research-based, frequent assessment (progress monitoring), and measures to assure fidelity of the intervention and assessment (Bender & Shores, 2007, pp. 8-15; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

In comparing the two models, Fuchs & Fuchs (2006) indicate that practitioners are more likely to use the problem-solving approach, but researchers are more likely to follow standard treatment protocols. They acknowledge that researchers have not yet explored the two approaches within the same experimental design. Standard treatment protocol is a relatively rigorous test for disability, leading to more rigorous identification (possibly false negatives); problem solving is less intensive and less systematic, potentially leading to less rigorous identification (some false positives), but may help prevent further learning problems (pp. 94 – 97).

Regardless of the model, Response to Intervention incorporates a tiered approach to instruction and interventions. A three-tiered model is the most common. Tier 1 entails scientifically validated instruction in the regular education classroom. Student progress is monitored three times each year. It is expected that 80% of students will respond to and
make progress with this instruction. Tier 2 entails scientifically validated interventions, usually delivered in small groups by either the regular education teacher or a member of the support staff (for example, a reading teacher). Progress is monitored more frequently, often every few weeks. It is expected that approximately 15% of children may require and benefit from Tier 2 interventions. In most settings, Tier 3 involves referral for testing to determine eligibility for special education. In these cases, the students’ response to Tier 1 and Tier 2 instruction is part of the criteria used to determine eligibility, along with other assessments. In other settings, Tier 3 involves more intensive interventions, delivered more frequently and often individually. Progress is monitored more frequently. The students’ responses to all three tiers of instruction may then be incorporated into a fourth tier, which is comprised of referral for special education eligibility. Only 5% of students are expected to require the top tier of interventions. In a few instances, five or six tiers are included in the RTI process. It is essential to note that, regardless of the number of tiers, data from consistent assessments are required to make decisions regarding the assignment of students to each tier and the movement of students from one tier to another. (Bender & Shores, 2007; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

There are two specific large-scale applications of RTI which are highlighted frequently in the literature: the Minneapolis Public Schools application, which began formal implementation of a three-tiered problem-solving model in 1992, and the Heartland Area Educational Agency, which began implementation of a four-tiered problem-solving model in 1990. The Minneapolis Public Schools model incorporates a sequential pattern of steps:

Stage 1: Classroom Interventions
Stage 2: Problem-Solving Team Interventions

Stage 3: Special Education Referral and Initiation of Due Process Procedures

(Bender & Shores, 2007, p. 9).

The Heartland Area Educational Agency, which serves approximately 24% of students in the Iowa Public Schools, began with a four-tiered model, but later switched to a three-tiered model after recognizing several “operational challenges” involved with the four-tiered, individually based system. Their current model uses the following three tiers:

Tier 1: Core Instructional Curriculum (all students involved)

Tier 2: Core Instruction and Supplemental Instructional Resources (students who need additional assistance – group or individual assistance)

Tier 3: Core Instructional and Intensive Resources (students who need intensive interventions and specialized resources on an individual basis)

Heartland applies a four-step decision-making process at each tier: define the problem, develop a plan, implement the plan, and evaluate. (Bender & Shores, 2007, pp. 10 & 11).

Brown-Chidsey & Steege (2005) suggest specific RTI components in a Three Tier model, when applied to reading instruction. Tier 1 activities include: “whole-class reading instruction using research-based curriculum; oral reading fluency benchmarks to monitor student progress three times per year; identification of the lowest 20%; and comparison with teacher judgment” (p. 149). Tier 2 activities include: “daily small-group instruction in addition to whole-class instruction (added reading instruction); direct and systematic instruction in the core reading skills which students need; monitoring of student progress using DIBELS and/or CBM (curriculum-based measurement); and referral for special education for those students still not meeting benchmark goals at
preset time points” (p. 149). Tier 3 activities include: “review of the Tier 2 data; comprehensive evaluation to identify why student has not responded to intervention; consideration of special education eligibility; development of IEP or other intervention; and ongoing progress monitoring” (p. 150).

As emphasized earlier, data from assessments are an essential component of RTI models, regardless of the number of tiers or the structure (problem-solving or standard treatment protocol). Curriculum-based measurement (CBM) is one option for progress-monitoring. Using a definition from Deno (2003), Mellard & Johnson (2008) state that CBM “assesses the different skills covered in the annual curriculum by providing equivalent alternate forms” (p. 47). According to Vaughn and Fuchs (2003), CBM is an “assessment system that permits modeling of student responsiveness to instruction”. Stecker, Fuchs, and Fuchs (2005) describe several distinguishing features of CBM: it assesses student progress towards long-term goals; it provides frequent monitoring and graphical depiction of student scores for decision making; it utilizes measures that are technically sound (pp. 796 – 797). Vaughn and Fuchs (2003), contend that “the most effective current model for addressing students’ LD is one that relies on progress-monitoring approaches directly linked to explicit and systematic instruction” (p. 140). Further, they assert that CBM is an assessment method which can provide many sources of data needed for “(1) modeling academic growth, (2) distinguishing between ineffective general education environments and unacceptable individual student learning, (3) informing instructional planning, and (4) evaluating relative instructional effectiveness” (p. 140).
All instruction and interventions in the RTI approach are required to be “evidence-based”. Brown-Chidsey & Steege (2005) define an intervention as being evidence-based “when it has been found to be effective in cases of well-designed and robustly implemented experimental analysis” (p. 39). They advise practitioners to become critical consumers of published research, analyzing “(1) whether the experimenters used sound research methodology and (2) whether the procedures employed are applicable to your population of students” (p. 39).

Bender & Shores (2007) provide, in their Appendix, a list of scientifically-validated curricula and other resources, but caution that there is no list of “scientifically-validated reading programs nor is there any consistency in what constitutes ‘scientific validation’ for a curriculum” (p. 119). Mellard & Johnson (2008) emphasize, “a knowledgeable staff and access to strong intervention resources are key in providing appropriate supports” (p. 139). It is clear that, in order to make decisions regarding appropriate instruction in the general education classroom and strong interventions for those who struggle, practitioners must possess considerable knowledge about effective content and instructional pedagogy.

Social Science Results

Policymakers and researchers have been debating various options for determining the existence of learning disabilities for years. Because the option to include RTI in determining eligibility for learning disabilities identification is so recent, many practitioners have not had direct experience with it. Therefore, there is not yet a significant body of research indicating the effects of using RTI to determine learning disabilities. There have, however, been strong indications that RTI is extremely useful as
a method of monitoring the progress of all students and of providing early intervention when needed. (Mellard & Johnson, 2008, p. ix; Bender & Shores, 2007, p. 4).

In 2002, outcome data from the Minneapolis School District (approximately 100 schools) indicated constancy in several areas, before and after implementation of the RTI model: the prevalence of students with high-incidence disabilities remained at 7%, the achievement level of these students was similar to that of students placed in special education using traditional methods, and the number of students placed in special education remained stable at 7% (Bender & Shores, 2007, pp. 9 & 10). The Heartland Agency reported a significant reduction in special education placement rates among kindergarten through third graders (Bender & Shores, 2007, p. 11). However, other researchers, such as Fuchs et al. (2003) have pointed out several problems with both of these models, principally in the areas of appropriateness and quality of the interventions and fidelity of the treatment (Bender & Shores, 2007, pp. 49 & 50).

 Vaughn and Fuchs (2003) summarize the research on RTI by describing these potential benefits: identification of students at risk rather than by deficit, early identification and treatment, reduction in identification bias, and connections among assessment, instruction, and progress monitoring. They articulate questions about RTI, including the integrity of the LD (learning disabilities) construct within an RTI model, validity of intervention models and assessment measures, the adequacy of RTI as the endpoint in identifying LD, the intensity of appropriate instruction, the availability of adequately trained personnel, and due process.

 Fuchs, Fuchs & Compton (2004) analyzed various methods of assessing responsiveness to instruction. They contend that there are two necessary components to
assess responsiveness-to-instruction: measures and classification criteria. Measures must be determined to assess students’ responsiveness to instruction, and criteria must be established to define non-responsiveness (p. 219). They acknowledge that there are questions about which measures and which criteria should be used to yield valid and reliable decision-making about a child’s responsiveness to instruction and the child’s disabilities. Their preliminary findings indicate that “alternate methods of assessing responsiveness produce different prevalence rates of reading disability and different subsets of unresponsive children” (p. 225). They contend that it is critical to establish “optimal cut-points to identify the children who fare worst over the course of their educational experience, and for whom reading, especially reading for meaning, represents a life-long skill deficit that results in poor post-school outcomes” (p. 226). They finish the summary of their analysis with the acknowledgement that, at this point, researchers don’t have a definitive answer to the critical question as to “which combination of assessment components is most accurate for identifying children who will experience serious and chronic reading problems that prevent reading for meaning in the upper grades and impair their capacity to function successfully as adults” (p. 226).

Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2005) acknowledge some opposition to wide-spread adoption of RTI policies until there is more evidence that they result in positive outcomes. The National Association of State Directors of Special Education has published a document entitled “Response to Intervention as it Relates to Early Intervening Services: Recommendations” (2007) in which they enumerate issues and barriers to effective implementation of RTI, such as disparate knowledge and skills about RTI, lack of clarity about characteristics of high quality instruction, and limited fidelity
of instruction. They also point to gaps in the research which result in a “lack of confidence in the knowledge base and a mismatch between current research and the immediate needs for implementation” (p. 5).

Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) recognize that practitioners need to choose between the “problem-solving approach” and the “standard treatment protocol”, neither of which has been proven to be better than the other. More educators use the problem-solving approach. Most of the research has been done on standard treatment protocol, which may be impractical on a large scale. However, the same authors believe that RTI holds considerable promise “in regards to how its multilayered structure can be implemented in the early grades to strengthen the intensity and effectiveness of reading instruction for at-risk students” (p. 98).

*Reading Research Quarterly* devoted its January/February/March 2006 issue to the relationship between RTI and reading interventions. In one article, Gerston & Dimino (2006) espouse RTI as a “much more sensible and comprehensible path than earlier attempts to actively assist classroom teachers in their work with struggling students” (p. 106). They reference research which indicates promise for this method, principally during the first few years of schooling, and highlight the integral link between RTI and the “concept of providing intensive early intervention to prevent later reading failure” (p. 101). Their ongoing research on Reading First in urban districts has uncovered the following benefits: teachers see RTI as a genuine part of the general education system, and the interventions are integrally connected with the core reading program (p. 102). They caution that RTI requires development of valid and reliable assessments and adequate teaching training in its use. They mention several lingering
concerns. First, most RTI research studies incorporate interventions delivered by well-trained research personnel or by teachers who are receiving continual support and guidance as they proceed through the process. As RTI is scaled up, it will be important for districts to provide consistent training and support to teachers. Second, they note that, in their field research, they observed a disturbing trend in that many of the benchmarks on tests such as DIBELS were treated as being inviolate, rather than being guidelines to be assessed over time. Third, they caution against “false positives”, which result in providing intensive services to young students who don’t need them. Fourth, they reference another writer’s (Scarborough, 2005) caution that reading is more than decoding of words; there are other non-phonological factors, such as proficiency in oral language, expressive vocabulary, and sentence or story recall which can also predict future reading success. Therefore, it is crucial to integrate vocabulary instruction and listening comprehension activities in the early grades (pp. 103 – 106).

In the same issue of *Reading Research Quarterly*, McEaneaney, Lose & Schwartz (2006) reflect on RTI as an “important opportunity to rethink traditional approaches to reading difficulties” (p. 125). However, they caution that “many years of systematic study suggest the concepts of disability and deficit have not been useful in our efforts to respond to the needs of struggling learners, yet these concepts continue to exert powerful influence on educational practice, public policy, and legislation” (p. 125). They are concerned that the requirements of RTI implementation exclude consideration of the variability of learners, the knowledge which children bring to instruction, and the “most immediate conditions that support learners: the teacher, classroom, school, and cultural variables within which any instructional approach operates” (p. 121).
As reported by Mellard & Johnson (2008), Fuchs et al. (2003) contend that some limitations of the problem-solving model include the lack of a strong evidence base that results in improved outcomes for students. These authors recommend a problem-solving model which incorporates the following attributes, as presented by Kovaleski in a paper presented to the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities in 2003:

- A scientific approach to problem solving
- Interventions designed for an individual student based on scientifically validated principles of effective curriculum and instruction
- A system for continual monitoring/evaluation of intervention
- Collaborative relationships with general education and special education to develop, implement, and monitor the intervention
- Collection of information from a variety of sources, including teachers, parents, and others who know the child
- Use of curriculum-based measurement to assist in problem identification and for continuing progress monitoring and evaluation of the effectiveness of the intervention
- Interventions embedded in the daily classroom routine so the classroom teacher takes responsibility for implementation (Mellard & Johnson, 2008, pp. 84 – 85).

In a standard-protocol approach for reading, Mellard & Johnson (2008) state that specific instructional techniques should be employed. They enumerate such strategies as self-monitoring, direct instruction, sequencing, drill and practice, use of technology, strategy cues, etc., as recommended by various researchers (pp. 86 & 87).
It is valuable to incorporate research about early reading, not merely RTI, into this analysis. Stewart (2004) maintains that an effective early reading program, in addition to the five components highlighted in NCLB, needs to include emphasis on oral language, literacy experiences, and connections between reading and writing (p. 732). She describes reading research which highlights the extremely complicated nature of early reading instruction. Effective first-grade classrooms studied by researchers exhibited excellent classroom management, a cooperative atmosphere, reinforcement and scaffolding of student learning, explicit instruction at the word level and in comprehension and writing, excellent literature experiences, monitoring of student progress, guidance to encourage students to complete academic tasks for themselves, and integration of reading and writing with content area learning (p. 740). Therefore, RTI for reading should reflect this complexity and encompass comprehensive literacy and writing skills as well as the skills emphasized in NCLB.

Research supports RTI for progress monitoring and data collection (decision-making), but there has not been enough research to support it as a means of SLD identification. Fuchs & Fuchs (2006) point out that RTI proponents still must prove the validity of “intervention-as-test” methods in relation to traditional methods of determining learning disabilities (p. 95).

After reviewing this social science literature, it is evident that there are distinct RTI components which address early reading difficulties. Synthesizing RTI and reading research, there appear to be five essential elements: strong classroom reading instruction which incorporates all the skills necessary for life-long reading proficiency, frequent assessments which incorporate these essential skills and which are aligned with the
curriculum, interventions aligned with classroom instruction, professional development regarding instruction and interventions, and fidelity of instruction and interventions. The problem-solving approach may be more practical to apply on a large scale; however, the standard-treatment protocol approach is the one which has received more attention from researchers. Therefore, it is difficult, at this point, to recommend one approach over the other. A three-tiered model of interventions (general classroom instruction, small group interventions, and intensive interventions and comprehensive evaluation for special education) is emerging as the preferred model.

**Relationship between RTI legal provisions and social science results**

In relation to this study, it is illuminating to note the relationship between the legal requirements and effective Response to Intervention models as they apply to early reading interventions. In their analysis of forty years of the impact of ESEA (Elementary and Secondary Education Act) and NCLB, Thomas & Brady (2005) argue that “current accountability requirements ... were developed from a theoretical perspective and lacked an understanding of the complex issues involved in serving disadvantaged schoolchildren” (p. 51). Further, they contend that a “thorough understanding of the role of state and local educational contexts in serving disadvantaged schoolchildren is needed to guide policymakers” and they “encourage educational researchers to develop more effective policy interventions” (pp. 51 & 52). From this analysis of the legal provisions and the social science literature regarding RTI, one could make a similar argument. While RTI, as encouraged in laws and regulations, holds considerable potential for assisting struggling learners, the social science literature does not support all of its provisions nor its applications in local school districts. The laws do not reflect the
complex issues of teaching all students to learn to read nor do they address all of the essential components of quality reading instruction.

While IDEA specifically encourages Response to Intervention as criteria for identification of specific learning disabilities, there is not yet a significant body of research supporting the utilization of RTI for this purpose. Further, McEneaney, Lose, & Schwartz (2006) raise concerns that IDEA relies too heavily on the deficit and discrepancy models rather than the “well developed research base focusing on the natural variability of readers and those models in literacy education that address the specific issues and concerns that RTI now seeks to address” (p. 121).

While NCLB and the Reading First regulations include five essential components of reading instruction, these emphasized areas don’t include several essential non-phonological skills. Gersten & Dimino (2006) point out the importance of addressing the needs of students with challenges related to vocabulary, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension (p. 105); while some of these components are included in NCLB, they contend that the application of RTI often focuses only on the phonological elements of reading instruction. Others, such as Stewart (2004), highlight the importance of oral language, literacy experiences, and making explicit connections between reading and writing, none of which is addressed in the legislation.

**Implications for educational practice**

As stated in a report from the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities (2005), “RTI procedures have the distinction that when implemented with fidelity, they can identify and intervene for students early in the educational process, thereby reducing academic failure among all students” (p. 12). Practitioners should thoughtfully apply all
of the essential components of RTI to their own educational settings. At the same time, they should consider the cautions outlined above. While there are many areas requiring further investigation, two which arise most prominently for this writer are the areas of cultural challenges and professional development as applied to content, instruction, and RTI. Research is needed on the applications of RTI with diverse groups of students. Further, significant professional development for general and special educators will be necessary to implement RTI successfully. The next two themes, culturally responsive teaching, and professional development in a professional learning community, will address both of these topics.

**Culturally Responsive Teaching**

There is general agreement that an achievement gap exists in the nation’s schools. This study investigated participants’ capacity to address this gap, specifically as it relates to early reading achievement among urban students of color who attend largely white suburban elementary schools. The researcher examined the extent to which the teachers observed differences, with regards to reading achievement and response to interventions, between the largely white students who live in the town and the predominately African-American students who were in the Urban Partners program.

Klinger and Edwards (2006) acknowledge that the change from the use of IQ-achievement discrepancy formulas to the use of Response to Intervention criteria has “dramatic implications for culturally and linguistically diverse students who historically have been disproportionately overrepresented in special education programs” (p. 108). However, they argue that, at all levels of RTI, culturally and linguistically diverse
students should receive instruction that is validated with students like them. They state that children must receive “culturally responsive, appropriate instruction” (p. 109).

In order to close the achievement gap, educators must ensure that students of color have ample opportunity to learn. Marzano (2003) contends, “Opportunity to learn (OTL) has the strongest relationship with student achievement of all school-level factors” (p. 22). The RTI model employs elements of this viewpoint regarding opportunity to learn because it provides struggling learners with increasing amounts of learning opportunities focused on their needs. Further, the model provides frequent monitoring of student progress and adjustment of instruction in response to student achievement. However, several authors suggest that such a model will not go far enough to give adequate opportunity to learn for students of color. For example, Starratt (2003) takes “opportunity to learn” a step further, stating that it can involve many variables, including linguistic and cultural ones: “If the instruction does not account for these variables, then it does not provide all students with an opportunity to learn” (p. 300). Gay (2000) states “culture is at the heart of all we do in the name of education” (p. 8) and underscores “the importance of placing culture at the center of the analysis of techniques for improving the performance of underachieving students of color” (pp. 9 & 10). Klinger and Edwards (2006) emphasize that, when evaluating RTI models, “we must ensure that children have received culturally responsive, appropriate, quality instruction that is evidence based….and validated with students like those with whom it was applied” (p. 109); otherwise we can not claim that they have had adequate opportunity to learn. They assert that RTI efforts should incorporate these considerations.
Some authors make recommendations for discrete skill development to address the achievement gap. For example, McCollin & O’Shea (2005) cite difficulties experienced by some students because of “limited levels of literacy development in home settings, limited levels of literacy in students’ native languages, cultural disparities, and/or cultural deprivation” (p. 41). They recommend specific interventions in phonological awareness, fluency, and comprehension. However, a research report in Education Week (Viadero 2008) summarizes recent research findings and affirms the argument that a more comprehensive overhaul is needed, one which fundamentally changes the learning environment, curriculum, instruction, and teacher expectations. This research suggests that African-American students who are the brightest may be losing the most ground academically in U.S. public schools. One study of nearly 7000 elementary students found that, among children who performed above the mean in kindergarten, by fifth grade, the gap had widened twice as much as with lower-performing children (p. 13). Another study of 800,000 children found achievement gaps growing fastest, from third to eighth grade, among the highest achieving students (p. 13).

This article quotes John B. Diamond, a professor of education at Harvard, who states, “There may be some issues around teacher expectations tied into race that have something to do with these outcomes. You really have to parse out educational opportunities and see what differences might be there.” (p. 13).

In essays about education of poor and minority children, Delpit and Haberman provide additional perspectives on this debate. Delpit (2003) espouses a focus on explicit teaching of basic skills, which she contends minority students will need to achieve in the real world. However, she believes that their education should also include higher-order
thinking and reasoning skills. Haberman (2003) implores the schools to change to meet the needs of poor students. He criticizes the “pedagogy of poverty” and describes basic urban teaching in terms of specific core functions which are skills oriented. He espouses the creation of a learning environment in which students become “involved and thoughtful”.

Delpit (2003), citing the differing perspectives on “skills” versus “process” approaches, contends that “the actual practice of good teachers of all colors typically incorporates a range of pedagogical orientations” (p. 168). She believes there is a “connecting and complex theme”, which she calls the “culture of power” (p. 169). She proposes five aspects of power, within the context of this discussion:

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms.

2. There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a “culture of power”.

3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.

4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.

5. Those with power are frequently least aware of – or at least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence. (p. 169).

Considering these aspects of power, Delpit (2003) advocates that:
• Students must be taught the codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life, … within the context of meaningful communicative endeavors;

• Students must be allowed the resource of the teacher’s expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their own “expertness” as well;

• While students are assisted in learning the culture of power, they must also be helped to learn about the arbitrariness of those codes and about the power relationships they represent (p. 187).

Going further, Delpit (2003) advocates for real dialogue between minority and white teachers. She wants teachers to initiate “true dialogue”, especially among teachers “whose perspectives may differ the most”. She contends that “the results of such interactions may be the most powerful and empowering coalescence yet seen in the educational realm – for all teachers and for all the students they teach” (p. 189).

Steele (1992) makes a strong case that black students frequently don’t identify with school and achievement because the schools fail to treat them as “valued person(s) with good prospects” (pp. 71 – 72). These students then de-emphasize academic achievement as a basis of their self-esteem. He advises “wise schooling”, which sees value and promise in black students and acts accordingly. “Wise schooling” contains four fundamental elements:

• The students feel valued by the teachers for their potential and as persons.
• Their education is guided by the challenge and the promise of personal fulfillment.

• The schools are racially integrated or, if they are segregated, they develop confidence based upon competitive skills and knowledge.

• The particulars of black life and culture, including “art, literature, political and social perspective, and music” are presented in the mainstream curriculum (pp. 77 – 78).

Aronson (2004) maintains that intellectual performance can be affected by the threat of stereotype. Steele (2003) defines “stereotype threat” as “the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm that stereotype” (p. 111). Aronson (2004) adds, “As research is showing, conditions that threaten basic motives – such as our sense of competence, our feelings of belonging, and our trust in people around us – can dramatically influence our intellectual capacities and motivation. And stereotype threat appears to threaten all these things at once.” (p. 16). He recommends that teachers and administrators should learn about “stereotype threat” and methods which educators can utilize to minimize negative stereotypes which suppress student achievement. Among his specific recommendations are: cooperative classroom structures in which students work interdependently, instruction which helps students understand that their intellectual abilities are expandable rather than fixed, teaching students about stereotype threat, and exposing minority students to role models “who have triumphed over similar academic struggles with hard work and persistence” (pp. 17 – 18).
Perry (2003) describes the kind of environments which are likely to promote academic achievement among students of color. “African-American students will achieve in school environments that have a leveling culture, a culture of achievement that extends to all of its members and a strong sense of group membership, where the expectation that everyone achieve is explicit and is regularly communicated in public and group settings” (p. 107). She adds that institutions which are also “culturally responsive and that systematically affirm, draw on, and use cultural formations of African Americans will produce exceptional academic results from African-American students” (p. 107).

Hilliard (2003) claims that educators and policymakers spend too much time focusing on a gap between African-Americans and European-Americans (whose achievement is often mediocre). Instead, he frames two gaps: one existing “between current performance of African students and levels of excellence” (p. 138); the other as a “quality of service” and “opportunity to learn” gap (p. 140). He makes a passionate case for adopting an approach that encourages high-quality teaching, high commitment to closing these gaps on the part of all educators and policymakers, and effective professional development. He pleads for gap-closing teachers, gap-closing principals, gap-closing teacher education facilities, and gap-closing professional education (p. 161).

Gay (2000) asserts that culturally responsive teaching uses “the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 29). She makes a compelling argument, supported by research, for improving student achievement through curriculum and instruction which directly respond to the cultural
diversity in society and in our schools. Culture plays a critical role in relation to student attitudes and achievement. It is imperative that teachers “understand how their own and their students’ cultures affect the educational process” (p. 9) and place “culture at the center of the analysis of techniques for improving the performance of underachieving students of color” (p. 10). There are key roles and responsibilities for teachers within the framework of culturally responsive pedagogy. Teachers must be cultural organizers, who recognize that culture affects classroom dynamics and who incorporate this factor into teaching and learning. Teachers must be cultural mediators, who create classroom communities in which culturally diverse learners celebrate and affirm each other. Teachers must be orchestrators of social contexts for learning, who match their teaching processes with the sociocultural contexts of ethnically diverse students (pp. 42 – 43).

Culturally responsive teaching validates and affirms the cultural heritage of diverse ethnic groups. It teaches the whole child. It encompasses curriculum content, learning context, classroom climate, student-teacher relationships, instructional techniques, and performance assessments. Gay (2000) describes it as being empowering, transformative and liberating since it enables students to be more successful learners, explicitly respecting the cultures and experiences of ethnically diverse learners, freeing them from reliance on mainstream knowledge and methods of learning (pp. 29 – 36).

Culturally responsive teaching is comprised of four key elements: teacher attitudes and expectations, cultural communication in the classroom, culturally diverse content in the curriculum, and culturally congruent instructional strategies. Teachers need to convey the message that they care about and set high expectations for ethnically diverse students. Gay (2000) outlines research findings which highlight several key
persistent trends in teacher expectations and offer insights into the changes needed to improve achievement of ethnically diverse students:

1. Teacher expectations significantly influence the quality of learning opportunities provided to students.

2. Teacher expectations about students are affected by factors that have no basis in fact and may persist even in the face of contrary evidence.

3. Assumptions about connections among the intellectual capability, ethnicity, gender, and classroom adjustment of students attest to the tenacity of teacher expectations, even in the face of contrary evidence.

4. Teachers tend to have higher universal academic expectations for European Americans than for students of color, with the exception of some Asian Americans.

5. Teachers’ expectations and sense of professional efficacy are interrelated (pp. 57 – 60).

This last point has direct implications for this research study, which focused on teachers’ perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling students. Gay (2000) contends, “teaching efficacy stems from the beliefs teacher hold about their abilities to positively affect the academic achievement of particular students” (p. 60). Teachers frequently attribute student failure to lack of intellectual ability or to a poor home environment rather than to poor teaching. However, studies suggest that teachers’ own low levels of efficacy contribute to the failure to learn experienced by some students. Gay concludes that “changing teachers’ attitudes, expectations, and feelings of efficacy is as imperative to the design and implementation of effective culturally responsive teaching as is
increasing their knowledge about and commitment to cultural diversity and mastery of related pedagogical skills” (p. 62).

Teachers also need to appreciate the importance of language in the learning process; as Gay contends, “languages and communication styles are systems of cultural notations and the means through which thoughts and ideas are expressively embodied” (p. 81). Teachers must utilize curriculum content which is culturally diverse. Ethnically diverse students need to feel empowered through academic success, cultural affiliation and personal efficacy. “Knowledge in the form of curriculum content is central to this empowerment” (p. 111). Finally, teachers must match their instructional strategies to the learning styles of these students. Gay claims, “Establishing congruity between different aspects of the learning processes of ethnically diverse students and the instructional strategies used by classroom teachers is essential to improving their academic achievement” (p. 148). For example, she recommends instructional strategies such as cooperative learning which have a positive affect on achievement, since students learn when they are actively and affectively engaged.

Klinger and Edwards (2006) present a framework for culturally responsive literacy instruction which draws upon the work of Wiley (1996). They describe three courses of action for working with students and families: accommodation, incorporation, and adaptation. Accommodation requires that educators connect with and understand the communication styles and literacy practices of their students and include them in their instruction. Incorporation requires educators to value community practices and acknowledge that they can learn from other ethnic groups. Adaptation requires that schools assist parents in their efforts to help their children acquire the skills they need to
meet the school’s expectations (p. 109). They contend that these three courses of action are necessary when implementing evidence-based interventions. “Central to our approach is the belief that instructional methods do not work or fail as decontextualized generic practices, but only in relation to the sociocultural contexts in which they are implemented” (p. 110).

Aronson (2004) provides a useful summary for multiple perspectives: “If we are serious about closing achievement gaps, we will have to move beyond the simplistic rhetoric of ‘It’s the family,’ or ‘It’s the schools,’ or ‘It’s poverty’ – or ‘It’s stereotyping,’ for that matter. Serious analyses make it clear that all of these factors matter. Unless we learn to think complexly about the problem, then surely we will continue to fail our big test, which is to find a way for all children to thrive in school” (p. 18).

Klinger & Edwards (2006) present a possible RTI model for culturally and linguistically diverse students. It incorporates evidence-based interventions and “culturally responsive attributes” (p. 113). They conclude that RTI models are in danger of becoming merely another deficit-based approach and that “the most effective interventions for culturally and linguistically diverse students will come from bringing together diverse perspectives, and from careful examination of notions about disability and cultural diversity within their full sociocultural and historical contexts” (p. 115).

According to Geneva Gay (2000), “conventional paradigms and proposals for improving the achievement of students of color are doomed to failure” (p. 12). She points to several high-profile innovations which appear to have a positive impact on the achievement of minority students, but questions their long-term effectiveness (p. 12). Beech School implement an RTI model utilizing conventional RTI resources. The
researcher examined the effects of this model through the lens of culturally responsive teaching. This study analyzed teachers’ reactions to struggling readers and evaluated whether there were similar changes between the teachers’ views of the model’s effectiveness with the general population and their views about the model in relation to Urban Partners students. As asserted by Klinger and Edwards (2006), when evaluating RTI instruction and interventions, “it is essential to find out what works with whom, by whom, and in what contexts” (p. 108).

Improving the achievement of students of color should receive high priority in a system’s training efforts. Training should include information about culturally responsive teaching (Gay 2000). Grossman & Ancess (2004) describe a collaborative action research project which demonstrates that a shared commitment to equity can identify and begin to dissolve barriers to high achievement for all. They maintain that the collaborative nature of this project created ownership and commitment which led to action; the teachers learned and practiced through their work together. The next theme will provide current thinking about various ways in which teachers can learn and practice their craft together.

**Professional Development in a Professional Learning Community**

The third theme of this study was *professional development in a professional learning community*. Professional development has the potential to help teachers acquire new skills, techniques, and understandings to become more proficient educators and therefore significantly increase student achievement. However, in many instances, there are questions regarding the impact of professional development on teacher expertise and student learning. The No Child Left Behind Act sets high standards for professional
development and requires that programs be evaluated for their impact on teaching practices and student achievement. However, “research on the effects of professional development on teachers’ classroom practice is often inconclusive or contradictory, and there is little agreement about which specific features of these programs are key to their effectiveness” (Seyfarth 2008, p. 124). Therefore, it is important to study the elements of various forms of professional development to determine the characteristics which hold the greatest promise for success.

Seyfarth (2008) defines professional development as “any activity or process intended to maintain or improve skills, attitudes, understandings, or performance of professional and support personnel in present or future roles” (p. 121). He contends that the focus should be on increasing the capacity of all teachers to strengthen student performance; therefore, professional development should be viewed from a systemic perspective. Its objectives include: implementing curriculum change, improving instructional practice, and enabling teacher growth. Effective professional development involves teachers in collaborative activities, is aligned with the system’s goals, and includes all teachers in a school, department or grade-level. It maintains a balance between “outside knowledge” (gained from consultants, courses, conferences, books, etc.) and “inside knowledge” (gained from conversations with and observations of colleagues and classroom experience). It creates change when it is sustained, intensive, and classroom-focused (pp. 121 - 125).

Danielson & McGreal (2000) outline several factors which contribute to professional learning: reflection on practice, collaboration, and self-assessment. They contend that “few activities are more powerful for professional learning than reflection on
practice” (p. 24), pointing out that we learn from our experiences only if we reflect upon them. Collaboration should be incorporated into reflection on practice, so that teachers are given opportunities for professional conversations which, in turn, can provide the possibility of more balanced and accurate interpretations of their practice. Teachers are more likely to sustain their learning if they use self-assessment and self-directed inquiry as a component of their professional growth efforts. When teachers engage in collaborative inquiry, it’s most beneficial if schools and districts support them with a systematic effort. By providing tangible support for these activities, schools and districts demonstrate their commitment to teachers’ continuing professional growth (pp. 24 – 26).

Thompson & Zeuli (1999) focus on the connections among systemic reform, standards, and professional development. They advocate for transformative professional development which is characterized by these five requirements:

1. a high level of cognitive dissonance to disturb teachers’ existing ideas about content, pedagogy, and learning
2. time, contexts, and support for teachers to think and work towards resolving the dissonance
3. connections between the dissonance-creating and dissonance-resolving activities and teachers’ own students and context
4. a way for teachers to develop a repertoire for practice which is consistent with their new understanding
5. support for a continuing cycle of reconstructive practice over an extended period (pp. 355 – 363).
Further, they contend that, to produce authentic change in teaching and learning, we need “transformative professional development, construed to include a wide variety of learning processes that combine expert guidance and peer interaction, carried out within a conceptual framework provided by professional standards for curriculum, instruction, and assessment” (p. 371). They recommend “wider and wider circles of learning” which include internal and external experts to achieve “transformative learning by teachers, leading to students’ learning by thinking” (p. 371).

Little (1999) advocates for integrating professional development more fully into the ongoing work of teachers. She posits that schools can advance teacher learning by doing the following:

- Emphasize teachers’ individual and collective responsibility for student achievement and well-being, and make inquiry into student learning a cornerstone of professional development.
- Organize time, teaching responsibilities, and other aspects of teachers’ work in ways that demonstrably enhance opportunities for teacher learning, both inside and outside the school.
- Employ staff development resources in ways that increase teachers’ ability to make well-informed use of ideas, materials, and colleagues.
- Conduct staff evaluation and program or school reviews in a manner consistent with teacher learning.
- Embrace an ethos genuinely conducive to teacher development (pp. 234 & 235).
Little (1999) highlights a substantial public interest in strengthening teachers’ motivation and opportunity to learn and cites research on the workplace contexts of teaching. Her suggestions take into account the considerations that context matters in shaping the practices of teaching and the perspectives of teachers, that there is currently a drive for more school-based professional development, and that “teaching requires continual discovery and judgment” (pp. 256 & 257).

Resnick & Hall (1998) contend that knowledge-based constructivism and effort-based learning should form the core of learning and aptitude theories for the twenty-first century. These theories should apply to adult learning as well as student learning. Knowledge-based constructivism is a learning theory which combines content knowledge and thinking processes. Effort-based learning is an aptitude theory which is attentive to habits of mind and the connections which learners make between their efforts and their learning (pp. 100 -107). This new core (knowledge-based constructivism and effort-based learning) creates heightened expectations for expert instruction which “promises to each student – regardless of the kind of measured ability he or she may show at the outset - as much instruction, of the highest quality, as he or she needs to meet a set of achievement standards that will not be compromised” (p. 108). In order to actualize these core theories into classroom content and pedagogy, teachers need ongoing professional development which is based upon the same principles. Therefore, schools and districts need to become learning organizations, or nested learning communities, in which all education professionals make “student learning the dominant focus of daily activities at every level” (pp. 109 - 111). In this scenario, teachers work together in a variety of ways to improve and coordinate their instructional practices. Administrators, likewise,
participate in ongoing professional development with their peers. The interactions among these groups create the “nesting” feature of nested learning communities. It’s essential for the entire school or district to be coordinated in these efforts, creating a structure which will “inspire – and, when necessary, require – continuous learning on the part of everyone in the system, from teachers to senior administrators” (p. 109).

Marzano (2003) contends that the school-level factor of “collegiality and professionalism” has an important impact on student achievement (p. 60). This factor deals with the manner in which teachers interact with each other and the extent to which they approach their work as professionals. It emphasizes conditions by which teachers may continually increase their content and pedagogical knowledge (pp. 60 – 64). He recommends action steps to: establish norms of conduct and behavior conducive to collegiality and professionalism; establish governance structures that encourage teacher involvement in decisions and policies; and engage teachers in meaningful professional development activities. Such meaningful activities should focus on content, provide opportunities for active learning, and have overall coherence (pp. 65 – 66).

The National Staff Development Council (2001) has developed context standards, process standards, and content standards for effective professional development. The explicitly stated focus is on staff development that improves the learning of all students. According to the Council, effective staff development contains the following context standards:

- Organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district. (Learning Communities)
• Requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement. (Leadership)

• Requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration. (Resources)

Such programs contain the following process standards:

• Uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement. (Data-Driven)

• Uses multiple sources of information to guide improvement and demonstrate its impact. (Evaluation)

• Prepares educators to apply research to decision making. (Research-Based)

• Uses learning strategies appropriate to the intended goal. (Design)

• Applies knowledge about human learning and change. (Learning)

• Provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate. (Collaboration)

These programs contain the following content standards:

• Prepares educators to understand and appreciate all students, create safe, orderly and supportive learning environments, and hold high expectations for their academic achievement. (Equity)

• Deepens educators' content knowledge, provides them with research-based instructional strategies to assist students in meeting rigorous academic standards, and prepares them to use various types of classroom assessments appropriately. (Quality Teaching)

• Provides educators with knowledge and skills to involve families and other stakeholders appropriately. (Family Involvement)  (from NSDC website)
Several overarching themes emerge from the literature about professional development. DuFour & Eaker (1998) incorporate many of these themes into their description of a Professional Learning Community. In a Professional Learning Community, the focus of professional development is on results, with the express purpose of improving the “ability of educators to help all students achieve the intended results of the school” (p. 261). A Professional Learning Community is characterized by:

1. Shared mission, vision, and values;
2. Collective inquiry
3. Collaborative teams
4. Action orientation and experimentation
5. Continuous improvement
6. Results orientation (DuFour & Eaker, pp. 25 – 29).

Several other authors espouse professional learning communities as vehicles for achieving the goals of effective professional development. In a Research Report about Professional Learning Communities, Protheroe (2004) states, “When a professional learning culture is in place, teachers are more likely to participate in collaborative activities and take collective responsibility for student learning” (p. 39). Hill and Crevola (1999) include Professional Learning Teams on their Design for Improving Student Outcomes (Figure 6.1, p. 123). They contend that “professional learning is most powerful when it occurs within the context of teachers working as members of a team and in pursuit of specific learning outcomes for students” (p. 130). Hargreaves (2003) describes professional learning communities as structures which transform knowledge, encourage shared inquiry, are informed by evidence, embrace uncertainty, utilize local
solutions, encourage joint responsibility, develop continuous learning, and promote communities of practice (pp. 184 & 185).

Using an earlier version (1995) of the NSDC Standards for Staff Development as a guide, DuFour and Eaker (1998) developed the following criteria for effective professional development in a professional learning community:

The content of effective staff development programs should:

- Be based on research.
- Focus on both generic and discipline-specific teaching skills.
- Expand the repertoire of teachers to meet the needs of students who learn in diverse ways.

The process of effective staff development should:

- Attend to the tenets of good teaching.
- Provide the ongoing coaching that is critical to the mastery of new skills.
- Result in reflection and dialogue on the part of participants.
- Be sustained over a considerable period of time.
- Be evaluated at several different levels, including evidence of improved student performance.

The context of effective staff development should:

- Be focused on individual schools and have strong support from the central office.
- Be job-embedded.
- Foster individual and organizational renewal. (pp. 276 – 277).
The project at Beech School incorporated several elements of staff development recommended for professional learning communities. For the study, the researcher evaluated one element within each of the categories of content, process, and context.

Within the content category, a staff development program should be based on research. Relevant background information and current thinking about the topic are gathered in order to ensure that the innovation “makes a difference in teacher effectiveness and the success of students” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 263). The staff development program becomes a vehicle to make connections between research and practice. Beech School’s RTI initiative incorporated current information from the legal and social science literature about Response to Intervention; the study asked teachers to assess the extent to which this content contributed to the project in a positive way.

In a professional learning community, the process of staff development results in reflection and dialogue. Staff development programs are “designed to develop thoughtful professionals who have the ability to assess and revise their own actions in order to improve the likelihood of success for their students” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 265). This initiative included opportunities for reflection and dialogue, since “creating small, supportive groups in which teachers are encouraged to discuss their questions, concerns, and ideas about a new program also enhances the successful implementation of a program” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 266).

In a professional learning community, the context of staff development is job-embedded. In contrast to the belief that educators learn through off-site training sessions, this view focuses on staff development within the daily work of educators. “Teachers are engaging in a powerful form of staff development each time they work together to
develop curriculum and assessment strategies; engage in the ongoing cycle of inquiry, reflection, dialogue, action, analysis, and adjustments in order to improve results; and give one another feedback as they practice new skills” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 273).

During Beech School’s RTI initiative, teachers participated in job-embedded staff development offered during school-wide staff meetings, on district-wide curriculum days, and, in some cases, during meetings which take place during the school day.

Many professional development efforts seek change in classroom instruction to impact student learning. The focus of the RTI initiative project was change in school-wide structures and procedures in order to impact student learning. This study examined the relationship between specific components of professional development and this type of school-wide initiative.

Conclusion

Response to Intervention, or RTI, recently has become a popular model utilized to address the needs of struggling learners. RTI serves two main purposes: providing early intervention to all children at risk for school failure and identifying children with learning disabilities. It was included in IDEA 2004 as a result of increasing costs of special education and general dissatisfaction with the IQ-achievement discrepancy model, which is criticized as a “wait-to-fail” approach. However, there are many questions and issues regarding RTI. Bender and Shores (2007) contend that it has been untested for effectiveness in determining eligibility for special education, but there is evidence for use of RTI as a progress-monitoring tool for all students, with or without disabilities (p. 1). Additionally, there are questions as to whether RTI is adequate and appropriate for students from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds.
According to Geneva Gay (2000), culturally responsive teaching can be defined as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 29). Culturally responsive teaching is comprised of four key elements: teacher attitudes and expectations, cultural communication in the classroom, culturally diverse content in the curriculum, and culturally congruent instructional strategies. Gay makes a compelling argument, supported by research, for improving student achievement through curriculum and instruction which directly respond to the cultural diversity in society and in our schools. Culture plays a critical role in relation to student attitudes and achievement. It is imperative that teachers “understand how their own and their students’ cultures affect the educational process” (p. 9).

The third theme of this study was professional development in a professional learning community. In a professional learning community, the content of a staff development program is based on research. Relevant background information and current thinking about the topic are gathered in order to ensure that the innovation “makes a difference in teacher effectiveness and the success of students” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 263). In a professional learning community, the process of staff development results in reflection and dialogue. Staff development programs are “designed to develop thoughtful professionals who have the ability to assess and revise their own actions in order to improve the likelihood of success for their students” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 265). In a professional learning community, the context of staff development is job-embedded. In contrast to the belief that educators learn through
off-site training sessions, this view focuses on staff development within the daily work of educators.

These three themes, *Response to Intervention*, *culturally responsive teaching*, and *professional development in a professional learning community*, each illuminated various aspects of this study: *The Impact of a “Response to Intervention” Initiative on Teachers’ Efficacy with Students of Color in a Voluntary Desegregation Program*. The project under study was a *Response to Intervention* initiative. Throughout the initiative, several components of effective *professional development within a professional learning community* were employed to educate the staff about RTI. The results of the study were analyzed through the lens of *culturally responsive teaching*.

Chapter Three will describe the research design. It will present an overview of the study and provide details about the research design, including the research questions, methodology, sample, data gathering procedures, methods of data analysis, formats for reporting the data, frameworks for discussing the findings, and limitations of the study.
Chapter Three: Research Design

Introduction

This chapter will present an overview of the study and provide details about the research design, including the research questions, methodology, sample, data gathering procedures, methods of data analysis, formats for reporting the data, frameworks for discussing the findings, and limitations of the study. Beech School was an elementary school in an upper-middle-class New England suburb located seven miles from a large city. The district initiated a “Response to Intervention” plan, to be developed and implemented over several years. During the 2007-08 school year, the district-wide focus for Response to Intervention (RTI) was in Kindergarten. In addition, this particular school was embarking on an RTI initiative in Grades 1 – 4 and had incorporated several action steps encompassing RTI in its School Improvement Plan.

The district was a member of Urban Partners, a voluntary integration program by which inner city children have an opportunity to attend school in the suburbs. As a group, the Urban Partners students at Beech School were not performing as well as the other students, and they were disproportionately represented among Special Education students and among students who were considered for repeating a grade.

For this study, the participant-researcher observed and analyzed how the structures and strategies of the RTI approach influenced the teachers’ perceptions of their capacity to help UP students achieve grade-level curriculum expectations. Further, the researcher analyzed the elements of the RTI implementation process, including professional development activities, which helped the teachers develop the school’s RTI
model. The overall design was a qualitative case study with a purposive sample of ten staff members.

In the introduction to qualitative research design, Merriam (1998) contends, “research focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education” (p. 1). This study explored the “discovery, insight and understanding” of the teachers as they incorporated RTI into their professional practice. Merriam (1998) explains that “interviewing, observing, and analyzing are activities central to qualitative research” (p. 2). During this study, the participant-researcher conducted interviews, made observations, and analyzed activities. Merriam (1998) further asserts that “the key philosophical assumption…upon which all types of qualitative research are based is the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (p. 6). During the RTI initiative, teachers were interacting with their colleagues and with the world of their school. Thus, this study incorporated these philosophical assumptions and activities to gain a deeper understanding of the RTI initiative, teachers’ approaches to their work with struggling students, and the impact of professional development activities throughout the initiative.

**Research Questions**

The research questions were:

1. To what extent did each professional development component of the RTI initiative influence teachers’:
   a. implementation of the RTI approach?
   b. perceptions of their efficacy with struggling Urban Partners students?
2. Which components of the RTI model did teachers:
   
a. Use during participation in the RTI initiative?

   b. Identify as being effective with struggling Urban Partners students?

3. How did participating in the Response to Intervention initiative affect teachers’ perceptions of their efficacy with struggling Urban Partners students?

**Research Methodology**

This section presents the research methodology and the scientific rationale for utilizing this methodology for this study. At the beginning of the study, the researcher gathered data, through a questionnaire, to determine what teachers perceived were the reasons the UP students were struggling, their perceptions of their capacity to help these students succeed, and their thoughts about various types of professional development. During the study, data was gathered to track changes in these perceptions and to analyze the teachers’ opinions about the professional development efforts. At the end, the researcher administered a follow-up questionnaire to determine the ways in which perceptions had changed and to study the components of RTI which appeared to be successful with UP students.

The study employed qualitative research methodology and an evaluative case study approach. As described by Merriam (1998), qualitative research includes several essential characteristics: an interest in understanding the meaning people have constructed about their world; the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis; fieldwork; an inductive research strategy; and a “richly descriptive” product (pp. 6 – 8). The qualitative research methodology was appropriate because this study
sought to determine teachers’ perceptions of their work with students and of a new initiative. The researcher, who was the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, was interested in understanding the meaning which the teachers were making of the RTI initiative. The study included fieldwork, since the researcher was working within the school. The researcher employed an inductive research strategy by building themes from the data. The product of the study will be descriptive, incorporating the participants’ words and descriptions of the context and activities, as well as charts and graphs, to support the findings of the study.

Merriam (1998) defines a case as “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (p. 27). Miles and Huberman (1994) define a case as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 25). The latter authors state that a case can be a sustained process (1994, p. 26). For this study, the case was the process of the RTI initiative, taking place within a single school year.

Merriam (1998) contends, “case study is a particularly suitable design if you are interested in process” (p. 33) and states that evaluative case studies involve “description, explanation, and judgment” (p. 39). This was an evaluative case study because the researcher evaluated the process of a new initiative, describing it, explaining it, and making judgments about it.

**Context for the Project and Study**

This section presents the composition of the community, the district, the school, the staff, and the sample. It also presents the rationale for the composition of the sample and the sample size. As stated by Miles and Huberman (1994) “qualitative researchers
usually work with *small* samples of people, nested in their context and studied in-depth” (p. 27).

**The Study Site**

The site of the study was an elementary school in an upper-middle-class New England community located seven miles from a large city. According to 2000 census data, the town had a population of 24,720 and a total area of 4.71 square miles. White residents comprised 91.2% of the population; black or African-American residents comprised 1.1%. According to the 2004 community profile on the town’s website, the median household income in 2000 was $80,295 and the median sales price of a single-family home in 2003 was $600,000.

The school district was a K-12 district of 3700 students. It included four elementary schools (Grades K-4), one middle school (Grades 5 – 8) and one high school (Grades 9 – 12). Central administrators included a Superintendent, an Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, a Director of the Urban Partners program, a Director and an Assistant Director of Special Education, a Director of Finance, a Human Resources Director, and one Curriculum Director each for the areas of Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Fine and Performing Arts, and Physical Education. At the high school, ninety percent of the students planned to attend a four-year college.

The elementary school enrolled 300 students, Grades K-4, consisting of fifteen self-contained “inclusion” classrooms, three classrooms per grade-level. The school population was largely white (over seventy-seven percent), with Asian students (nine percent) being the next largest ethnic group. The school district was a member of Urban
Partners, a voluntary integration program by which inner city children have an opportunity to attend school in the suburbs. Beech enrolled approximately fifteen (five percent of the school population) of these students each year. During the year of the study, all but one of these students were African-American.

**Staff Demographics**

In addition to the fifteen classroom teachers, staff members included two part-time special education teachers (a total of 1.0 FTE), one Language Arts specialist, one part-time Speech teacher, seven full-time or part-time classroom aides who focus on special education students in Grades 1 - 4, two classroom assistants shared among the three half-day Kindergarten classes, a part-time guidance counselor, a part-time psychologist, a part-time ESL tutor, a full-time nurse, a part-time library aide, and part-time Art, Music, and Physical Education teachers. One hundred percent of the core academic teachers were identified as highly qualified. There was a student/teacher ratio of 16.3 to 1. Although the district received some Title I funds, this school did not.
**Student Demographics**

Table 1 provides demographic data about the school and the district.

### Table 1

**Student Demographic Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>% of school</th>
<th>% of district</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>77.3</td>
<td>76.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-race, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Five percent of the students in the school and in the district were low income.

The percentage of Special Education students at the school was 9.7%, compared to 14.1% in the district.

The Spring 2007 MCAS scores for the school and district are supplied in Tables 2 – 5:

### Table 2

**Grade 3 English Language Arts MCAS Scores: Spring 2007**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 3 ELA</th>
<th>school</th>
<th>district</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Above Proficient</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs Improvement</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warning</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3
Grade 3 Mathematics MCAS Scores: Spring 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 3 Mathematics</th>
<th>school</th>
<th>district</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Above Proficient</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs Improvement</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warning</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4
Grade 4 English Language Arts MCAS Scores: Spring 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 4 ELA</th>
<th>school</th>
<th>district</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs Improvement</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warning</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5
Grade 4 Mathematics MCAS Scores: Spring 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 4 Mathematics</th>
<th>school</th>
<th>district</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Advanced</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs Improvement</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warning</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sample and Rationale for Sample

Participants in the RTI initiative (from which the study’s sample was drawn) included all fifteen of the classroom teachers (three each at each grade-level, Kindergarten through Grade 4), two Special Education teachers, the Language Arts Specialist, the Speech and Language Pathologist, and the Principal (who was also the participant-researcher).

The RTI initiative took place throughout the 2007-08 school year. It included the following components:

- In the fall, the Kindergarten teachers attended district-wide training sessions in the use of the DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) assessments. At the school level, several staff meetings included discussions about RTI, giving preliminary information about the three RTI goals on the School Improvement Plan and drafts of RTI models as they would apply to Beech School. In addition, the participant-researcher (as project-leader) gave a one-hour presentation about RTI, during a staff meeting. This presentation included information about the legal background of RTI, what the school district was promoting relative to RTI, and the RTI goals as they appeared in the School Improvement Plan.
- Kindergarten teachers administered DIBELS assessments to Kindergarten students throughout the year. They analyzed these results, under the guidance of the Language Arts Specialist and the DIBELS trainers.
- Teachers at all grade-levels (K – 4) administered Language Arts assessments (consistent at each grade-level) in fall, winter, and spring.
In November, the school held “Class TATs”, as part of the school’s RTI model. During each Class TAT (Teacher Assistance Team), a classroom teacher met with the school’s support team (Special Education staff, Language Arts Specialist, etc.) and discussed all the children in his/her class. Prior to the meeting, each teacher completed a chart which provided assessment data about each student. The discussion during a Class TAT meeting focused on students who were struggling, usually not children who were already in Special Education. As a result of each meeting, decisions were made about various types of support which could be given to individual students or groups of students.

On February 1, 2008, the district held a Professional Development Day. At Beech School, the participant-researcher conducted a workshop for the Grades K-3 teachers and the Language Arts specialist, with a focus on RTI. Following the workshop, the staff made revisions to the school’s draft of an RTI model.

During a one-hour staff meeting in early April, the project leader gave the teachers three brief articles about RTI. The articles were chosen to address specific questions which had arisen regarding the school’s RTI model. At each grade-level, the three teachers were each given a different article to read. Specific questions were given, in relation to the articles. After the teachers read the articles, they discussed the answers to the questions with their grade-level colleagues.

In mid-April, the school held another series of “Class TATs”.
Throughout the spring, the school’s RTI model was revised as the staff learned more about this concept and as the components of RTI were adapted to the specific needs of the school.

The RTI initiative took place throughout the school year. However, this study began in early January. At that time, the staff had received some preliminary training and had applied some components of RTI, but extensive training and application had not yet taken place.

The participants in the study were a purposeful sample of the participants in the initiative. According to Merriam (1998), “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). The sample was comprised of ten staff members. Seven study participants were classroom teachers, representing a range of grades (K-4), with teaching experience ranging from three to thirty years. Three of these classroom teachers taught Grades 3 or 4, three taught Grades 1 or 2, and one taught Kindergarten. The remaining three were the Language Arts Specialist, one Special Education teacher, and the principal (the researcher as a participant-observer).

Staff members were involved in developing the project during the first several months of the school year. After finalizing the school-wide project with the entire staff during a staff meeting in early November, the researcher described the study, explained the expectations for participants, and solicited volunteers. The researcher informed the teachers that she would like to have at least one Kindergarten teacher, two teachers from Grades 1 & 2, two teachers from Grades 3 & 4, and two from Support Staff (Special
Education, Speech, and Reading) in order to gather data from a range of grade-levels and perspectives. Further, she explained that teachers who have gained professional status and who represented a range of years of experience were preferred. The following faculty members volunteered: one Kindergarten teacher, three Grades 1 & 2 teachers, three Grades 3 & 4 teachers, and two Support Staff teachers.

All participants were volunteers. Their real names have not been used in any reports; all their responses were confidential. They were given an informed consent form, detailing the purpose of the study, the data gathering activities, the voluntary nature of the study, provisions for confidentiality, assurances that they could withdraw at any time, and a statement that their participation or withdrawal would not affect their standing at the school in any way. The form explicitly stated that they would receive no compensation or other tangible benefits as a result of their participation in this study. All participants signed the informed consent form.

**Pilot Test**

All of the instruments used in this study were reviewed by a panel of experts. These experts included the cluster members in the doctoral program, individual members of the cohort group, and professors who were experts in qualitative and quantitative research. With regards to the questionnaires, they were also reviewed by the Language Arts specialist, the district’s technology specialist (who had recently completed a doctoral program and who helped the researcher to create the questionnaires using Survey Monkey) and a group of teachers. The interview questions and focus group questions were reviewed by other educators (members of the cluster) prior to being utilized with the study participants. A paper copy of the initial questionnaire was piloted with a group of
teachers, and modified according to feedback, prior to its development as a SurveyMonkey questionnaire.

**Data Gathering Procedures**

This section presents the instruments which were used and the methods by which the instrument results were gathered, recorded, and organized. Data collection was conducted with consideration of reliability, validity and researcher-bias (the researcher was the project leader). The instruments included questionnaires, individual interviews, focus group discussions, observations, and written reflections by the study participants. The researcher triangulated the data from these sources and kept notes and artifacts related to the project as it progressed.

The researcher administered pre-intervention and post-intervention SurveyMonkey questionnaires (one in January and one in June) to the purposive sample of teachers, to determine what they perceived were the reasons the Urban Partners students were struggling, their perceptions of their capacity to help these students succeed, their beliefs about the effectiveness of various forms of professional development, and their thoughts on successful interventions (see Appendixes A and G).

The researcher conducted a focus group discussion with all participants in March, using questions designed to gather follow-up data after the initial survey (see Appendix C). This discussion served the purpose of gathering data in the middle of the project. She conducted an individual interview with each participant in April (see Appendix F).

The study participants submitted reflections following other phases of the initiative. After the spring Class TATs, the researcher asked the classroom teachers to provide feedback regarding the experience, by giving responses to open-ended reflective
questions (see Appendix E). After the Professional Development Day, each participant responded to questions which asked them to rate various aspects of the activities (see Appendix B). After the April staff meeting, the participants provided feedback via responses to open-ended reflective questions (see Appendix D). The researcher triangulated the data from all of these sources and kept notes and artifacts related to the project as it progressed.

**Methods of Data Analysis**

This section will present the research questions and relate the analysis of the data to each question. Merriam (1998) advises the qualitative researcher that “getting started in data analysis…involves the recognition that it is best done in conjunction with data collection” (p. 177). In this study, the data analysis took place simultaneously with data collection. The data from each instrument was analyzed chronologically; these results informed revisions of subsequent instruments.

The first research question was: To what extent did each professional development component of the RTI initiative influence teachers’ implementation of the RTI approach and perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students? Reflective feedback after staff meetings and other professional development activities was coded to determine the participants’ changing knowledge about RTI, implementation of RTI, and beliefs about help for struggling readers and for UP students in particular.

The second research question was: Which components of the RTI model did teachers use during participation in the RTI initiative and identify as being successful with struggling Urban Partners students? The data from Class TATs, reflective feedback
after professional development activities, interviews, and focus group sessions was coded and analyzed to observe changes and patterns. Data from these sources was triangulated.

The third research question was: How did participating in the Response to Intervention initiative affect teachers’ perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students? Each instrument address this questioned. Data was organized chronologically, according to the order in which each instrument was administered. A software program (SurveyMonkey) was used to assist analysis of the two questionnaires. The interviews and focus group sessions were audio-taped, transcribed, and checked for accuracy. Phrases from these transcriptions and from the written reflective feedback from participants were coded. The researcher looked for patterns and for changes over time. The data from these sources was triangulated. In order to increase the internal validity of the study, the researcher recorded the steps as the data was organized and analyzed.

Merriam (1998) asserts that “to begin the more intensive phase of data analysis in a case study, all the information about the case should be brought together...(and) organized in some fashion so that data are easily retrievable” (p. 194). The researcher created this “case study data base” (p. 194) and performed the analysis.

**Formats for Reporting the Data**

This section will present the ways in which the data from the study was displayed. The researcher organized the data displays according to the research questions. She utilized narrative text to provide explanations and visual displays to present the data. As stated by Miles and Huberman (1994), “valid analysis requires, and is driven by, displays that are focused enough to permit a viewing of the full data set in the same location, and
are arranged systematically, to answer the research question at hand” (p. 91 – 92).

**Frameworks for Discussing the Findings**

This section will present the framework for the discussion about the research results. The researcher discussed the findings in relation to the research questions. She restated the research questions to frame the results of the study. She discussed the findings within the context of the three themes developed in the Chapter Two literature review: *Response to Intervention, culturally responsive teaching, and professional development in professional learning communities.* She compared the findings to existing theory and research and presented the analysis in Chapter Five.

**Limitations of the study**

There were several limitations to this study.

- Because of the small number of teachers and of UP students, one cannot assume that the results represent all possible perspectives.
- This study took place at a single site within a single school year; it therefore cannot be generalized to all similar situations.
- This school was developing the RTI model during the project. The initiative was in its first year in the district; therefore the results cannot be generalized to models which are fully developed.
- The participants reflected a purposeful sample of volunteers, who may not necessarily represent all of the teachers who were involved in the initiative.
- The district was conducting a study of its literacy program, utilizing an outside team who was interviewing teachers and requesting that
teachers complete questionnaires. This history could have affected teachers’ fatigue and/or enthusiasm for responding to additional interviews and questionnaires.

- The instruments and the initiative itself changed during the course of the study. As the researcher gathered and analyzed data, she made modifications to some of the questions in the instruments. As the school reflected on its practices during the initiative, there were changes in its RTI model. These changes could have affected the results of the study, especially in relation to comparisons between the beginning and end of the study.

- The participant-researcher was the project leader and the principal of the school. Therefore, it is possible that teacher responses were affected by the fact that the researcher was also their supervisor and evaluator.

Chapter Four will present the findings, in chronological order, of the study as it progressed. Following the chronological presentation, the findings will be synthesized and summarized, in relation to each of the research questions. Chapter Four will begin with a description of the site, the issue, the project, the study, the participants, and the units of analyses. Then, the findings of the surveys, interviews, feedback forms, and focus group meeting will be presented, in chronological order, followed by a summary of these findings in relation to the research questions.
Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

This chapter presents the findings, in chronological order, of the study as it progressed. Following the chronological presentation, the findings will be synthesized and summarized, in relation to each of the research questions. Chapter Four will begin with a description of the site, the issue, the project, the study, the participants, and the units of analyses. Then, the findings of the surveys, interviews, feedback forms, and focus group meeting will be presented, in chronological order, followed by a summary of these findings in relation to the research questions.

Chapter Five will present comments on the meaning of these findings, specifically in relation to the literature review presented in Chapter Two, which revolved around three themes: Response to Intervention, culturally responsive teaching, and professional development in professional learning communities. Chapter Five also will focus on the implications of the findings, regarding RTI, regarding the education of students of color, and regarding professional development for teachers.

Description of site, issue, project, study, participants, and units of analyses

The site of the study was Beech School, an elementary school in an upper-middle-class New England community located seven miles from a large city. This school enrolled 300 students, Grades K-4, consisting of fifteen self-contained “inclusion” classrooms, three classrooms per grade-level. The school population was largely white (over seventy-seven percent), with Asian students (nine percent) being the next largest ethnic group. The school district was a member of Urban Partners, a voluntary
integration program by which inner city children have an opportunity to attend school in the suburbs. Beech enrolled approximately fifteen (five percent of the school population) of these students each year. During the year of the study, all but one of these students were African-American. As a group, the Urban Partners students at Beech School were not performing as well as the other students, and they were disproportionately represented among Special Education students and among students who were under consideration for repeating a grade.

During the year of this study, the school district initiated a “Response to Intervention” plan, to be developed and implemented over several years. The district-wide focus for Response to Intervention (RTI) was on literacy in Kindergarten. In addition to its participation in the district-wide initiative, Beech School was embarking on a school-wide RTI literacy initiative in Grades 1 – 4 and had incorporated several action steps encompassing RTI in its School Improvement Plan.

Participants in Beech School’s RTI literacy initiative (from which the study’s sample was drawn) included all fifteen of the classroom teachers (three each at each grade-level, Kindergarten through Grade 4), two Special Education teachers, the Language Arts Specialist, the Speech and Language Pathologist, and the Principal (who was also the participant-researcher).

The RTI literacy initiative took place throughout the 2007-08 school year. It included the following components:

- In the fall, the Kindergarten teachers attended district-wide training sessions in the use of the DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) assessments. At the school level, several staff meetings included discussions
about RTI, giving preliminary information about the three RTI goals on the School Improvement Plan and drafts of RTI models as they would apply to Beech School. In addition, the participant-researcher (as project-leader) gave a one-hour presentation about RTI, during a staff meeting. This presentation included information about the legal background of RTI, what the school district was promoting relative to RTI, and the RTI goals as they appeared in the School Improvement Plan.

- Kindergarten teachers administered DIBELS assessments to Kindergarten students throughout the year. They analyzed these results, under the guidance of the Language Arts Specialist and the DIBELS trainers.

- Teachers at all grade-levels (K – 4) administered Language Arts assessments (consistent at each grade-level) in fall, winter, and spring.

- In November, the school held “Class TATs”, as part of the school’s RTI model. During a Class TAT (Teacher Assistance Team), a classroom teacher met with the school’s support team (Special Education staff, Language Arts Specialist, etc.) and discussed all the children in his/her class. Prior to the meeting, each teacher completed a chart which provided assessment data about each student. The discussion during a Class TAT meeting focused on students who were struggling, usually not children who were already in Special Education. As a result of each meeting, decisions were made about various types of support which could be given to individual students or groups of students.
• On February 1, 2008, the district held a Professional Development Day. At Beech School, the participant-researcher conducted a workshop for the Grades K-3 teachers and the Language Arts specialist, with a focus on RTI. Details about this workshop appear later in this chapter. Following the workshop, the staff made revisions to the school’s draft of an RTI model.

• During a one-hour staff meeting in early April, the project leader gave the teachers three brief articles about RTI. The articles were chosen to address specific questions which had arisen regarding the school’s RTI model. At each grade-level, the three teachers were each given a different article to read. Specific questions were given, in relation to the articles. After the teachers read the articles, they discussed the answers to the questions with their grade-level colleagues.

• In mid-April, the school held another series of “Class TATs”.

• Throughout the spring, the school’s RTI model was revised as the staff learned more about this concept and as the components of RTI were adapted to the specific needs of the school.

The RTI initiative took place throughout the school year. However, this specific study began in early January. At that time, the staff had received some preliminary training and had implemented some components of RTI, but extensive training and implementation had not yet taken place. At the beginning of the study, the researcher gathered data, through an initial questionnaire, to determine what teachers perceived were the reasons the Urban Partners students were struggling and their perceptions of their capacity to help these students succeed. During the study, data was gathered to track
changes in these perceptions and to analyze the teachers’ opinions about the professional
development efforts. At the end of the study, in June, the researcher administered a
follow-up questionnaire to determine the ways in which perceptions had changed and to
study the components of RTI which appeared to be successful with UP students.

For this study, the researcher observed and analyzed how the structures and
strategies of the RTI approach influenced the teachers’ perceptions of their capacity to
help UP students achieve grade-level curriculum expectations. Further, the researcher
analyzed the elements of the RTI implementation process, including professional
development activities, which helped the teachers develop the school’s RTI model. The
overall research design was a qualitative case study.

Merriam (1998) defines a case as “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which
there are boundaries” (p. 27). Miles and Huberman (1994) define a case as “a
phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” (p. 25). The latter authors
state that a case can be a sustained process (1994, p. 26). For this study, the case was the
process of the RTI initiative, taking place within a single school year.

Merriam (1998) contends, “case study is a particularly suitable design if you are
interested in process” (p. 33) and states that evaluative case studies involve “description,
 explanation, and judgment” (p. 39). This was an evaluative case study because the
researcher evaluated the process of a new initiative, describing it, explaining it, and
making judgments about it.

The researcher investigated the following research questions:

1. To what extent did each professional development component of the RTI
   initiative influence teachers’:
a. implementation of the RTI approach?

b. perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students?

2. Which components of the RTI model did teachers:

a. use during participation in the RTI initiative?

b. identify as being successful with struggling Urban Partners students?

3. How did participating in the Response to Intervention initiative affect teachers’ perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students?

The participants in the study represented a purposeful sample of the project participants, one of whom was the researcher (as a participant-observer) who was the principal of the school and the leader of the project. The remaining participants comprised a sample of nine staff members, seven of whom were classroom teachers, representing a range of grades (K-4), with teaching experience ranging from three to thirty years. Three of these classroom teachers taught Grades 3 or 4, three taught Grades 1 or 2, and one taught Kindergarten. The remaining two participants were the Language Arts Specialist and a Special Education teacher.

The researcher utilized codes when analyzing the data. To determine the codes, the researcher sought out specific themes within each research question and applied them to the three themes of this study: Response to Intervention, culturally responsive teaching, and professional development in professional learning communities.

Regarding the components of Response to Intervention, the researcher identified the following categories of responses, which were coded during the analysis of the data:

- Assessment

- Class TAT (Teacher Assistance Team) meetings
• Interventions

With respect to the theme of *culturally responsive teaching*, the researcher sought to determine the reasons the teachers believed that the UP students may struggle with reading, and identified these categories of responses for coding during the data analysis:

• Specific reading skills
• Curriculum and instruction
• Culture and language
• Experiences outside of school
• Parental involvement.

With respect to the theme of *professional learning communities*, the researcher identified and coded three themes, which are consistent with the professional development recommendations cited in the literature review in Chapter Two. These recommendations contend that effective professional development should include:

• Content which is based upon research
• Process which incorporates reflection and dialogue
• Context which is job-embedded.

**Presentation of Findings**

The findings will be presented in seven sections, in chronological order consistent with the order in which the data was gathered. First, the presentation of findings will begin with data gathered through an initial SurveyMonkey questionnaire. The questionnaire asked the participants to respond to questions which were categorized into five topics:
• their knowledge about Response to Intervention
• the extent to which the school is addressing the needs of struggling readers
• reasons some students have difficulty learning to read
• possible solutions to address the issue of struggling readers
• various forms of professional development.

Second, this section will present the data from written feedback regarding a Professional Development Day, which focused on Response to Intervention.

Third, the researcher will present data from a focus group discussion, during which participants responded to questions about RTI, professional development, and addressing the needs of Urban Partners students.

Fourth, the researcher will present the data gathered from a written feedback form, which followed a staff meeting discussion about three professional articles on RTI.

Fifth, the researcher will present the data from another written feedback form, following one specific component of the RTI initiative, Class TATs.

Sixth, the researcher will present data gathered through individual interviews with each participant.

Finally, the researcher will present the data gathered from a final SurveyMonkey questionnaire, which asked the participants to respond to essentially the same questions to which they responded in the initial questionnaire. The researcher will compare these results to those of the initial questionnaire.

In each of these seven sections, the researcher will provide data showing the perceptions of the teachers at that stage of the initiative and a preliminary discussion of
the general themes emerging at each stage. The researcher’s field notes will provide narrative and clarification about each stage of the study and relevant events during the project. In the conclusion, the researcher will triangulate the data and synthesize these themes, in relation to each of the research questions and make some preliminary connections to the professional literature. More detailed connections to the professional literature will be presented in Chapter Five.

**First cluster of findings: initial questionnaire**

The researcher created a questionnaire, using Survey Monkey, to which all nine of the study participants responded in January 2008 (see Appendix A). The questionnaire asked for responses to questions which were categorized into five topics:

- their knowledge about Response to Intervention,
- the extent to which the school is addressing the needs of struggling readers,
- the reasons some students have difficulty learning to read,
- possible solutions to address the issue of struggling readers, and
- various forms of professional development.

At this beginning stage of the project, the subject of RTI had been discussed at several staff meetings. These discussions revolved around three RTI goals on the School Improvement Plan and drafts of RTI models as they would apply to Beech School. In addition, the researcher (as project-leader) had given a one-hour presentation about RTI, during a staff meeting. This presentation included information about the legal background
of RTI, what the school district was promoting relative to RTI, and the RTI goals as they appeared in the School Improvement Plan.

**Topic 1: Knowledge about Response to Intervention**

On the questionnaire, the teachers were asked to assess their knowledge of RTI by responding to the question, “What do you believe is the current extent of your knowledge about Response to Intervention?” The choices were: none, slight, moderate, and significant. Seven of the nine teachers (77.8%) responded “slight”; two of the teachers (22.2%) responded “moderate”. Table 6 displays these results. The table shows that most of the teachers believed that they had only limited knowledge about RTI at the beginning stage of the project. This data reveals that the limited amount of professional development which had occurred at this point was not enough to give the teachers confidence in their knowledge about RTI.

Table 6: Current Knowledge about RTI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do you believe is the current extent of your knowledge about RTI?</th>
<th>none</th>
<th>slight</th>
<th>moderate</th>
<th>significant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentages</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>77.8%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Topic 2: The extent to which the school is addressing the needs of struggling readers**

The teachers were asked two questions about the extent to which the school is addressing the needs of struggling readers. The first question asked, “To what extent do you believe this school is addressing the needs of our struggling readers?” One (11.1%)
of the nine respondents chose the “slight” option. Eight of the respondents (88.9%) chose the “moderate” option. The second question asked, “To what extent do you believe this school is addressing the needs of our struggling readers who are Urban Partners students?” Four of the nine respondents (44.4%) chose the “slight” option; five of the respondents (55.6%) chose the “moderate” option. No teachers responded “none” or “significant” to either question. Table 7 is a display of these results.

Table 7: Perception of School’s Response to Struggling Readers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers’ responses about the extent to which the school is addressing needs of struggling readers</th>
<th>none</th>
<th>slight</th>
<th>moderate</th>
<th>significant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General population of students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Partners students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data in Table 7 shows that the teachers believed that the school was doing a moderately good job of addressing the needs of struggling readers, but that it could do better. Further, it appears that the teachers had less confidence in the school’s ability to address the needs of the Urban Partners students than in the school’s ability to address the needs of the general population of students. This data does not show the reasons why teachers held this belief. That dimension will be analyzed within the context of Topic 3.

**Topic 3: The reasons some students have difficulty learning to read**

Two of the survey questions asked the teachers to indicate the degree (none, slight, moderate, or significant) to which various factors contribute to a struggling student’s difficulty with learning to read. Twenty-one factors were listed. The first of these two questions asked teachers to assess these factors with regard to the general
population of students in the school. The second question asked teachers to respond with regard to the struggling readers who are Urban Partners students. Within each of these questions, six factors identified specific reading skills. Four factors related to the students’ experiences outside of school. Five factors focused on influences of culture, language, gender, socio-economic, and development. One factor focused on parental involvement. Five factors focused on the school’s curriculum and instruction.

Table 8, Factors Contributing to the Difficulties of Struggling Readers, illustrates the teachers’ perceptions of the reasons for which some students struggle to learn to read, by displaying the rating average for each of the twenty-one factors. A rating average is a weighted average of the responses. A response of “none” generated a value of “0”; “slight” generated a value of “1”; “moderate” generated a value of “2”; “significant” generated a value of “3”.

Table 8 provides data about the teachers’ perceptions in relation to the general population of struggling readers and the specific population of struggling readers who are Urban Partners students. As depicted in this graph, the teachers rated three factors as holding a significant influence (a rating of 2 or higher) on the reading difficulties of both groups of students: lack of phonemic awareness, weak reading fluency, and weak comprehension skills. Teachers rated four factors as holding only a slightly significant influence (a rating of 1 or lower) on the struggling readers in both groups of students: gender influences, the age-inappropriateness of the district’s curriculum, lack of sufficient instructional strategies, and inadequate instructional materials. It appears that the teachers identified specific reading skills which are a challenge for all struggling readers. It also appears that the teachers believed that the curriculum, instructional
strategies, and instructional materials they used were adequate to meet the needs of all students.

Table 8: Factors Contributing to the Difficulties of Struggling Readers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>General Population Rating Average</th>
<th>Urban Partners Rating Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lack of phonemic awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of phonics skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak reading fluency</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limited vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak oral language skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak comprehension skills</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of life experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of background knowledge</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of early literacy experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of pre-school experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cultural influences</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linguistic influences</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>socio-economic influences</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gender influences</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>developmental issues</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limited parental involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the district’s curriculum is not age-appropriate</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of sufficient instructional strategies</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of access to early intervention</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inadequate reading instructional time</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inadequate instructional materials</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8 also shows some similarities and some differences between the teachers’ ratings with regard to the general population of students and their ratings regarding the Urban Partners students. The graph depicts clear differences in the factors of vocabulary, oral language skills, life experiences, background knowledge, early literacy experiences, pre-school experiences, and parental involvement. With the exception of the factors of vocabulary and oral language skills, these factors refer to a student’s experiences outside of the school setting. To a certain extent, even the factors of vocabulary and oral language can be attributed to the effects of a student’s experiences outside of school. This data reveals that the teachers believed that the factors which influence the difficulties of Urban Partners students are largely due to factors outside of the school setting.

Table 9 provides specific information about the differences between the teachers’ responses in relation to general population and to the Urban Partners students. This table provides more detail about the substantial differences (greater than one point) between the teachers’ perceptions of these two groups of students (general population and Urban Partners). These differences pertain to the influences of the lack of life experiences, background knowledge, early literacy experiences, pre-school experiences, and parental involvement, with teachers believing that the Urban Partners students were more affected by deficits in these areas.
Table 9
Differences between rating average for factors influencing General Population and Urban Partners Students

Factors 1 – 6: Specific reading skills
Factors 7 – 10: Experiences Outside of School
Factors 11 – 15: Culture and Language
Factor 16: Parental Involvement
Factors 17 – 21: Curriculum and Instruction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. lack of phonemic awareness</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. lack of phonics skills</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. weak reading fluency</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. limited vocabulary</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. weak oral language skills</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. weak comprehension skills</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. lack of life experiences</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. lack of background knowledge</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. lack of early literacy experiences</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. lack of pre-school experiences</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. cultural influences</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. linguistic influences</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. socio-economic influences</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. gender influences</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. developmental issues</td>
<td>-0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. limited parental involvement</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. the district’s curriculum is not age-appropriate</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. lack of sufficient instructional strategies</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. lack of access to early intervention</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. inadequate reading instructional time</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. inadequate instructional materials</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 9 indicates, there were some differences (a difference between six-tenths and one point) in terms of limited vocabulary and oral language skills. There were small differences (a difference between two-tenths and six-tenths points) in terms of lack of phonemic awareness, lack of phonics skills, weak comprehensions skills, socio-economic influences, and lack of access to early intervention. There was a slight difference or no difference (a difference between -0.1 and 0.1 points) in terms of weak reading fluency, cultural influences, linguistic influences, gender influences, the age-appropriateness of the district’s curriculum and lack of sufficient instructional strategies, and inadequate...
instructional materials. Interestingly, the teachers attributed the following factors as
being less significant for the Urban Partners than for the general population:
developmental issues, lack of sufficient instructional strategies, and inadequate reading
instructional time.

In summary, this data reveals that, at this beginning stage of the study, the
teachers believed that all struggling readers were affected by lack of phonemic
awareness, weak reading fluency, and weak comprehension skills but that the school’s
curriculum, instructional strategies and instructional materials were adequate. Further,
the data reveals that the teachers attributed far less influence on the Urban Partners
students’ struggles exerted from the school’s instructional strategies, materials, and
curriculum, and far more influence exerted from outside factors: life experiences,
background knowledge, early literacy experiences, pre-school experiences, and parental
involvement.

Earlier in this chapter, categories of reasons Urban Partners students struggle were
given. These categories were: specific reading skills, curriculum and instruction, culture
and language, experiences outside of school, and parental involvement. Within the
context of these five categories, teachers attributed influence with regards to some of the
specific reading skills, little influence by the curriculum and instruction, little influence of
culture and language, significant influence by experiences outside of school, and
significant influence by parental involvement. Referring back to the question raised at
the end of the discussion about Topic 2, it appears that the teachers had less confidence in
the school’s ability to address the needs of UP students because of the significant
influence they placed on outside factors, not on the school’s curriculum and instruction.
Later in this chapter, this data will be compared with the results of a similar SurveyMonkey questionnaire, which was given at the end of the study, to determine whether there were any changes in the teachers’ perceptions as a result of the RTI initiative.

*Topic 4: Possible solutions to address the issue of struggling readers*

Another question asked, “What solutions would you like to implement? Please indicate the degree to which you believe (the school) should implement each of the following possible solutions.” The choices for each solution were “not at all”, “slight”, “moderate”, and “significant”. Table 10 displays these responses and the rating average for the responses, based upon a scale of 0 – 3.

**Table 10: Possible Solutions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>not at all</th>
<th>slight</th>
<th>moderate</th>
<th>significant</th>
<th>Rating Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>greater access to early intervention</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more small group instruction for all students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>access to more information about effective reading interventions</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>access to information about instructing culturally diverse learners</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>access to information about instructing linguistically diverse learners</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more practice with differentiated instruction</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>increased connections with parents regarding instruction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>changes in the TAT (Teacher Assistance Team) structure</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>increased use of our Language Arts Assessment Framework to assess students and plan instruction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>technology applications for practice of reading skills</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data in Table 10 indicate that, at this beginning stage of the RTI initiative, the teachers were most interested in implementing the following solutions: greater access to early intervention, greater use of small group instruction, and access to more information about effective reading interventions. They appeared to be least interested in changes in the TAT (Teacher Assistance Team) structure and increased connections with parents regarding instruction. Later in this chapter, the researcher will present the responses to a similar question which was given at the end of the initiative and analyze any differences as a result of the RTI initiative.

**Topic 5: Professional development**

The final question asked, “What types of professional development regarding the components of RTI (Response to Intervention) will likely be most beneficial to you? Please rate how beneficial you believe each of these types could be.” Ten choices were listed, to be rated on a scale of 0 – 3. Table 11 is a summary of the results.

Table 11: Types of Professional Development about RTI

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>not beneficial</th>
<th>somewhat beneficial</th>
<th>moderately beneficial</th>
<th>significantly beneficial</th>
<th>Rating Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>attending conferences about RTI</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attending workshops about RTI</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reading articles about RTI</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reading selections from books about RTI</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discussing RTI strategies with grade-level colleagues</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discussing RTI strategies with cross-grade-level colleagues</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discussing RTI strategies with specialists</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participating in RTI study groups</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keeping a reflective journal about your experiences with RTI</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hearing presentations about RTI during staff meetings</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The data in Table 11 reveals that the teachers were most interested in discussions with their colleagues (grade-level colleagues, cross-grade-level colleagues, and specialists), with a rating average of 2.6 for each. They also had some interest in most of the other options, with rating averages of 1.8 to 2.3, but very little interest in keeping reflective journals about their experiences with RTI. This data supports the belief that the process of professional development should include dialogue. With regards to the process of reflection, these teachers indicated an interest in reflection which involved discussion, rather than solitary reflection involving writing in a journal.

**Second cluster of findings: Professional Development Day (February 1, 2008)**

On February 1, 2008, the district held a Professional Development Day. At Beech School, the participant-researcher conducted a workshop for the Grades K-3 teachers and the Language Arts specialist, with a focus on RTI. (The Grade 4 teachers and the Special Education staff were assigned to workshops at other locations in the district, so they were not part of this RTI workshop. As a result, only six of the nine study participants were at this workshop.) The workshop lasted three hours and included a brief review of the legal issues and RTI structures which had been introduced in the fall. The majority of the time was spent reading three professional journal articles about RTI and discussing the articles in small groups, guided by a specific discussion protocol. All three articles were from peer-reviewed professional journals, written by well-recognized leaders on the topic of RTI. Following these discussions, the project leader led the teachers in an exercise of applying their learnings from the articles to make modifications to the school’s RTI model.
The researcher administered a one-page feedback form (see Appendix B) to the six study participants who attended, to elicit their thoughts about the workshop’s impact on their knowledge about RTI and the school’s ability to address the needs of struggling readers. Table 12 provides an overview of the results.

Table 12: Impact of Professional Development Day Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Review of legal issues</th>
<th>Reading three articles</th>
<th>Discussing three articles</th>
<th>Updating RTI model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helpful to learning about RTI</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful to address needs of struggling readers</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helpful to address struggling readers who are UP students</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data in Table 12 reveals that the teachers found the reading, discussion, and application of what they were learning about RTI to be very effective in meeting three goals: learning about RTI, addressing the needs of struggling readers, and addressing the struggling readers who are UP students. When asked which parts of the Curriculum Day were helpful in learning about RTI, three of the six found the review and discussion of legal issues to be helpful; six of the six respondents found reading the articles to be helpful. Six of the six found using the “discussion protocol” to be helpful; three of the six found the update of the Beech School’s RTI model to be helpful. Rosemary commented, “Each article I read about RTI helps to clarify its approach to identifying and then teaching those children identified as ‘at risk’”. Several teachers specifically mentioned the “discussion protocol” as being helpful. For example, Colleen stated, “I
liked the ‘discussion protocol’ a lot. It helped us stay focused and allowed everyone a voice.” Joe recognized the relationship between the content (of the articles) and the context (job-embedded): “We are dealing with the everyday implementation (of RTI). The articles and discussions help with the overview and rationale.”

When asked which parts of the Professional Development Day will help them address the needs of struggling readers, four of the six respondents found review and discussion of legal issues to be helpful; five of the six found reading the articles to be helpful; five of the six found discussion of the articles to be helpful; five of the six found updating the school’s RTI model to be helpful. Joan highlighted the relationship among these activities: “I think having the background (information) on the laws explained and reviewed, then reading and discussing the articles and then trying to apply it to our needs will help our struggling readers”.

With respect to addressing the needs of struggling readers who are UP students: two of the six found review of legal issues to be helpful; five of six found reading articles to be helpful; five of six found discussion of articles to be helpful; six of six found updating our RTI model to be helpful. Jackie commented, “The articles addressed struggling readers. Based on my experience, most of the UP students who I have taught would have benefitted from RTT”.

To summarize, when answering all three questions, the teachers consistently gave positive feedback regarding reading professional journal articles and discussing them with colleagues. Highly positive responses were also given to the application of the articles to the school’s RTI model. It appears that the teachers would support the contention that professional development should include content which is research-based
(in this case, professional journal articles written by well-respected authors). It appears that the teachers agree that the process of professional development should include reflection and dialogue. Further, the data indicates that the teachers agree that the context of professional development should be job-embedded. In this case, the articles and discussion were immediately applied to the school’s RTI model. It’s interesting to note that the teachers found this last aspect to be most helpful in addressing the needs of struggling UP students. It appears that the teachers, at this stage of the initiative, were beginning to gain more confidence in the capacity of the school to address the needs of these students, as a result of the RTI initiative. As Rosemary expressed, “Tier 2 and Tier 3 should certainly get the UP students who are struggling the help they need in a much more timely fashion. They will be identified early and quickly get extra support”. She and other teachers were viewing RTI as a positive tool.

**Third cluster of findings: Focus Group Meeting (March 17, 2008)**

The researcher held a focus group meeting with the study participants in mid-March, at approximately the mid-point of this project. This meeting focused on three topics: the impact of the RTI initiative on the school’s ability to address the needs of the Urban Partners students; the effectiveness of the various Professional Development activities which were part of the initiative; and the specific elements of the Professional Development activities which were effective (see Appendix C). Eight of the nine study participants were present at this session.

With respect to the first topic, professional development components of the RTI initiative, the teachers found the content of the articles and presentations to be helpful.
Jackie stated that the presentation which provided background information about the laws and terminology related to RTI was helpful. Four teachers highlighted the professional articles about RTI as being very helpful in providing clarity about the tiers, the time frames, and the types of interventions (Colleen, Joan, Helen, and Fran). However, Joan, after agreeing that the articles were helpful, said, “one of the things that I needed to see was what our model would look like” and stated that “it didn’t really click until we had our own outline”. Rosemary agreed that “actually doing it and getting into it” was necessary, while acknowledging that the DIBELS assessment training, which the Kindergarten teachers received, was essential. Helen stated, “Reading the articles on curriculum day was when I really started to see the whole picture”, and added, “I like the idea that we can structure it the way that we want to as well”.

To summarize, these teachers spoke very passionately about two of the three professional development components of professional learning communities: the content should be based upon research and the context should be job-embedded. They found that the readings from professional journals (content based upon research) and the applications of the content to their own workplace (context is job-embedded) were particularly important in their implementation of the RTI approach. Their responses validate the recommendations for effective professional development in professional learning communities: the content should be based upon research and the context should be job-embedded.

When asked about the second topic, if the professional development about RTI helped with their struggling readers who are Urban Partners students, the teachers engaged in a discussion about the complicated task of helping these students succeed.
They commented on the challenges these students face when coming from the city to a suburban school. They expressed concerns about the lack of parental involvement and, in some cases, the lack of a “stimulating environment” in the homes of these students. However, one of the teachers expressed hope that RTI, since it involves so many support staff members, will help determine better ways to address their needs.

To summarize, the teachers believed that RTI will help the Urban Partners students in the same way that it will help all students. However, none of these teachers mentioned any specific aspects of professional development which was helping them to meet the specific needs of their Urban Partners students who were struggling. The teachers appeared to recognize that RTI can be a support structure to help teachers and students, but they also identified a need to build a stronger home-school partnership.

When asked about the third topic, which components of the RTI initiative helped address the needs of struggling readers who were Urban Partners students, the teachers mentioned two of the main components: the assessments and the interventions. First, they stated that assessments can be used to identify students and to specify the area in which a student is struggling. Second, they mentioned the benefits of interventions, defined as pulling the children out and working with them in small groups. The teachers also shared in-class strategies they use with students they’ve identified through the RTI initiative. For example, Colleen described the way her student teacher and classroom aide work with these students in small groups, either during the first few minutes of the day, or after a mini-lesson. This data reveals that these teachers were expanding their knowledge about the range of RTI interventions, including out-of-class and in-class interventions.
Other teachers shared some suggestions to augment the RTI initiative. For example, Fran recommended that the school institute “literacy blocks” so that all the classes at one grade-level would teach literacy at the same time, thereby allowing more “fluidity” for specialists to work with students in small groups. This idea was well-received by the other participants.

Jackie added that children in the UP program are usually struggling, “not all, but most of them”, and felt that “had they had the RTI model in kindergarten and first grade, they would have done better in smaller groups, with more intervention”. She later suggested the creation of an “RTI tool kit” of materials to help in specific areas of literacy, such as vocabulary; these materials could be sent home to help the parents support the children. This idea was well-received by the other participants.

To summarize, most of the teachers identified the assessments and interventions of the RTI model as being successful; some specifically related these assessments and interventions to their work with UP students. Some question whether RTI can do enough, stating the lack of parental involvement and “stimulating” environment in the homes of these students. However, one teacher suggested the potential that the assessment components of RTI would provide information about the learning profiles of these students, thereby gaining more information about how to adjust instruction. Two other teachers suggested changes: one suggested a change in the school’s schedule, to create literacy blocks, and the other suggested the creation of “RTI tool kits” to help parents support their children. This data reveals that the teachers saw potential in RTI, but had mixed beliefs as to whether it was enough to meet the complex needs of the UP students.
Fourth cluster of findings: Staff Meeting (April 7, 2008)

During a one-hour staff meeting in early April, the participant-researcher gave the teachers three brief articles about RTI. The articles were chosen to address specific questions which had arisen regarding the school’s RTI model. At each grade-level, the three teachers were each given a different article to read. Specific questions were given, in relation to the articles. After the teachers read the articles, they discussed the answers to the questions with their grade-level colleagues. Following this meeting, the researcher asked the study participants to respond to written questions about the value of aspects of this type of professional development (see Appendix D). Specifically, the questions asked for feedback about the value of reading articles during staff meetings and of discussing the articles with colleagues whose jobs are similar and with colleagues whose jobs are different. Another question asked about the value of involving all professional staff members in these discussions. A final question summed up this topic by asking: “How valuable is it to have reading, reflection, and dialogue as part of your professional development?” The possible responses to each question about the aspects of professional development were: no value, minimal value, some value, and significant value.

With one exception, the teachers responded that all of these aspects held “some value” or significant value”. The one exception related to the value of reading articles during staff meetings. Four of the nine teachers responded that it holds “significant value”. Four responded “some value” and one responded “minimal value”. Some of the teachers stated that they would prefer to read the articles prior to the meeting. As Jackie expressed, “I think that it might be useful to read the article prior to meeting so that there is more time to absorb the information and jot down questions”. Joe echoed this
sentiment, stating, “It would be better to read them ahead of time”; however, he cautioned, “but, I’m not sure folks would have a chance to do that. If we read and discuss, the information is fresh in our minds”.

With respect to all the other questions, teachers emphasized strong support of reflection and discussion during staff meetings. Jackie stated, “Overall, I think reflecting through discussion allows us to problem solve and think of various possibilities”. Two teachers highlighted the value of dialogue with colleagues in roles which are different. Rosemary stated that such dialogue “is a way of getting other perspectives. I need to get ideas from all levels to get the whole picture of our needs”. Irene supported this notion, stating, “this is most valuable to me in meetings because we tend to speak to (our similar) grade-level staff a lot”.

This data reveals that these teachers are strongly supportive of job-embedded professional development during staff meetings. Further, they appreciate the value of reflection and dialogue with colleagues. They value involving all professional staff members in these discussions. As Rosemary explained, “All of us are involved in RTI in some way. All need to be well-versed in this initiative”. Colleen added, “I think that having all staff members involved is important especially because many of the support staff members are involved in implementing the RTI interventions to students”.

Joan summarized her responses by expressing, “I love learning together. My style of learning is that I need to talk to understand. Hearing viewpoints from other colleagues (grade-level, cross-grade-level, and specialists) helps me not only understand the subject better, but also helps me understand what it looks like from their perspective. The best is when we all have a common language on which to have rich conversation.”
At this stage of the initiative, the teachers continued to value the three components of professional development which the researcher was studying: content which is based upon research, process which includes reflection and dialogue, and context which is job-embedded.

**Fifth cluster of findings: Class TATs feedback (Spring 2008)**

Part of Beech School’s RTI model includes “Class TAT” meetings, which were held in the fall and in the spring. These Class TAT meetings were part of the progress-monitoring component of RTI. During a Class TAT (Teacher Assistance Team), a classroom teacher met with the school’s support team (Special Education staff, Language Arts Specialist, etc.) and discussed all the children in his/her class. Prior to the meeting, each teacher completed a chart which provided assessment data about each student. The chart was developed by two of the study participants (a classroom teacher and the language arts specialist). They solicited feedback from all teachers while they developed it. The Class TAT meeting focused on students who were struggling, usually not children who were already in Special Education. As a result of each meeting, decisions were made about various types of support which could be given to individual students or groups of students.

Following the Spring 2008 Class TATs, the study participants were asked to respond to written questions about the effectiveness of the Class TAT in helping teachers respond to the needs of struggling readers (see Appendix E). Specifically, the teachers were asked if the spring Class TAT helped them to meet the needs of struggling readers in general, and if it helped with any particular needs of struggling readers who are Urban
Partners students. They were asked about intervention strategies which may have been identified during the spring Class TAT, and about any additional feedback they had about Class TATs (fall and spring) in general. During the analysis of these responses, the participant-researcher will distinguish between the responses of the seven classroom teachers and those of the two teachers who are in support positions (the special education teacher and language arts specialist).

Four of the seven classroom teachers found the spring Class TATs beneficial. Joan stated, “The spring Class TAT gave me the opportunity to review all students’ progress with specialists and identify students who will need continued support for the beginning of next year”. Helen said, “I felt that we were able to just discuss specific students that are struggling and find strategies to help them this year and next”. Colleen elaborated, “The Spring TAT was helpful in that it provided a forum to share information about children who continue to struggle with reading at this point in the year. It also gave me a chance to voice concern about one child in particular who came in the middle of the school year and was NOT a concern (earlier), but is now. I then added this student to a group of my students who work with the reading specialist for skill practice”. Jackie expressed, “Spring TAT helped because it was nice to look at data from the fall and compare it to the winter. Using the assessments, classroom work and day-to-day observations provided more information that addressed the children who were still not making progress. Using the information it was easier to make changes to curriculum, add more practice, or restructure lessons.” All of these four teachers highlighted the progress-monitoring component of RTI and believed that the spring Class TAT supported this component in a way which benefitted students.
Three of the seven classroom teachers were less enthusiastic about the spring Class TAT. In these cases, the planned format of the Class TAT was not followed. For the fourth grade teachers, the meeting was combined with a Middle School transition meeting. One of these teachers, Irene, suggested “It may be best, next year, to keep the Class TAT and the Middle School Transition meeting separate in order to discuss more specific needs of the students and to be able to discuss children who have needs that only need to be addressed in Grade 4, but are not serious enough to include in the Middle School meeting”. Similarly, the Kindergarten Class TATs focused on discussions about retention; therefore, they did not serve their intended purpose. However, Rosemary, a Kindergarten teacher stated, “This TAT helped all of us, I think, to get a better idea of the kinds of students that will be moving on to first grade….. We need to think carefully about the kind of first grade curriculum that will best fit their needs”. Despite the change in focus of the meeting, this teacher appears to recognize that the discussion was valuable in that it led to curriculum and instructional planning for the following year, in response to student needs.

The study participants who are members of the support staff (language arts specialist and special education teacher) responded positively to the question about the Spring Class TAT. Fran’s comment refers to assessment, curriculum and instruction: “I think the Spring TATs addressed more the awareness that our low readers are on grade-level and struggle when they are compared to our higher level readers – not to the curriculum”. It appears that she is underscoring the necessity of keeping valid and reliable assessment data, based upon grade-level criteria. Claire reflected on the value of tracking the progress of all struggling readers and noted that “teachers were able to
identify a need and then tailor their instruction based upon needs”. She appears to be underscoring the value of progress-monitoring and then using assessment data to inform instruction and interventions.

With respect to the value of the Class TATs for struggling Urban Partners students, the teachers felt that they held the same value as for all students who are struggling. They did not mention any needs which are particular to this population which were addressed.

When asked about intervention strategies which were identified during the Class TATs, several teachers mentioned small group instruction in response to identified needs. They gave examples of support they provided within their classrooms and of support which the reading specialist provided outside of the classroom, without identifying specific intervention strategies. Two teachers suggested that some specific intervention strategies be added to the RTI model. For example, Colleen requested, “I’d love more strategies to help readers who still struggle with sight word and high frequency word recognition, as well as fluency and comprehension strategies”. Joan suggested, “It would be beneficial to have a flow chart of intervention strategies (something similar to the eligibility chart for SPED services)…. If A, then try these B strategies, etc. That way, we would have a common language and common, concrete strategies from which to try and on which to report”.

In response to the question about the Class TATs in general, teachers reiterated comments they had already made. Two also made recommendations relative to the timing of the fall and spring Class TATs, expressing the value of coordinating the
assessment schedule (as part of the school’s Language Arts assessment framework) with the Class TAT schedule.

In summary, the teachers expressed strong support for the Class TAT component of Beech School’s RTI model, highlighting the value of frequent progress-monitoring and interventions for struggling readers. They expressed that it benefitted the Urban Partners students just the same as the general population of students, but did not see any additional benefit for the struggling readers who are Urban Partners students. They made recommendations for strengthening the model, requesting targeted intervention strategies and closer coordination of the assessment and TAT schedules. As this initiative was progressing, the teachers continued to express enthusiasm for the three RTI components of progress-monitoring, interventions, and Class TATs.

**Sixth cluster of findings: individual interviews (April 30, 2008)**

The researcher conducted individual interviews with each of the study participants. The interview questions covered all of the research questions (see Appendix F). The format of the interview allowed the researcher an opportunity to explore each of the topics in greater depth with each participant.

**Professional Development Components**

First, the teachers were asked directly about the extent to which the specific elements of the RTI professional development were helpful as they learned about RTI. All of the teachers expressed positive beliefs about the three elements the researcher was studying: the content is based on research; the process includes reflection and dialogue, and the context is job-embedded.
When asked how the professional development activities helped instruct the struggling readers who are Urban Partners students, the teachers responded that the professional development helped the UP students just as it helped all the students, but that it didn’t address specific issues with UP students. Irene expressed that, as a minority, it is natural for her to think about these issues, but that “we haven’t really come to a place as a staff where we really talk about Urban Partners. We talk about it but we haven’t really come to any conclusions.” She recommended a “more holistic approach”, including cultural factors, a home piece, and attention to a student’s self-image. She recommended that we “look at the research, have reflection and dialogue, and share” information about effective strategies with these students, just as we did with respect to RTI.

Other teachers suggested professional development on a variety of related topics: helping the UP students to make better connections with the curriculum, addressing the achievement gap, and using Response to Intervention to help.

Some of the teachers mentioned the focus group meeting, when speaking about professional development. This forum, at which they reflected and heard colleagues’ ideas, gave them an opportunity to learn from each other. The focus group meeting was not part of the RTI initiative, but was part of the study. For the study participants, it became a vehicle for professional development about meeting the needs of UP students, by asking questions about the topic, leading to reflection, dialogue, and further reflection.

RTI Components

At this stage of the RTI initiative, the school had incorporated three components of the school’s RTI model: assessment, Class TATs, and interventions. When
responding to the question about the ways in which the RTI initiative was helping them address the needs of struggling readers, all teachers identified these three components within their responses. With regards to the struggling readers who were Urban Partners students, the teachers echoed prior statements that RTI was helping these students in the same way that it was helping all students.

Suggestions regarding next steps in RTI

The teachers made several suggestions regarding the next steps which the school should take in its RTI initiative. They suggested the scheduling of “literacy blocks” to create more flexibility to group students for reading assistance. They suggested that they create a “tool-kit” of resources for interventions, which could be used by teachers and also given to parents. Specific to the needs of the Urban Partners students, they suggested making greater connections with parents to help them understand their child’s learning profile and to help them become a stronger part of the instructional plan for their children. They suggested creating a stronger partnership with the Urban Partners organization, and incorporating vocabulary activities in an RTI “tool kit”. They requested additional information about helping the students make closer connections with the curriculum and about ways to address the achievement gap.

Summary of Individual Interviews

To summarize these individual interviews, the teachers voiced strong support for the components of professional development and the components of RTI. They suggested that the next steps in the school’s model of RTI should include literacy blocks. This suggestion is consistent with providing adequate opportunity to learn for all students, and with the RTI recommendations that students be given strong general
classroom curriculum and instruction (Tier 1). Literacy blocks would also provide
greater opportunity for the school to provide consistent Tier 2 interventions.

In response to questions which arose about educating the Urban Partners students,
the teachers recommended an RTI tool kit, making stronger connections with parents,
helping the students to make connections with the curriculum, and participating in
professional development and staff discussions about meeting the needs of the UP
students. All of these suggestions make sense within an RTI framework. However,
according to the literature on culturally responsive teaching, it’s essential that the school
also seek ways to make connections with and value the students’ experiences.

**Seventh cluster of findings: Final questionnaire**

On the final questionnaire (see Appendix G), the teachers were asked essentially
the same questions they were asked on the initial questionnaire.

**Topic 1: Knowledge about Response to Intervention**

One question was, “What do you believe is the current extent of your knowledge
about Response to Intervention?” Table 13 shows the results from the Initial Survey
(originally recorded in Table 6) and the results from this Final Survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do you believe is the current extent of your knowledge about RTI?</th>
<th>none</th>
<th>slight</th>
<th>moderate</th>
<th>significant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Survey responses</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Survey responses</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
These results indicate that the teachers’ perceptions of their knowledge about RTI increased during the project. At the beginning, all the teachers indicated “slight” or “moderate” (7 and 2 respectively). At the end, all the teachers indicated “moderate” or “significant” (6 and 3 respectively). This data reveals that the RTI professional development activities which took place during the initiative gave the teachers increased confidence in their understanding of RTI. It appears that the sustained, on-going professional development activities, which included the professional development components under study (content is research-based, process includes reflection and dialogue, context is job-embedded), were effective.

**Topic 2: The extent to which the school is addressing the needs of struggling readers**

The teachers were asked two questions about the extent to which the school is addressing the needs of struggling readers. These two questions were identical to two questions in the initial survey. The first question asked, “To what extent do you believe this school is addressing the needs of our struggling readers?” This time, none of the respondents chose the “none” or “slight” options. Seven of the respondents (77.8%) chose the “moderate” option. Two respondents (22.2%) chose the “significant” option.

The second question asked, “To what extent do you believe this school is addressing the needs of our struggling readers who are Urban Partners students?” This time, none of the respondents chose the “none” or “slight” options. Eight of the respondents (88.9%) chose the “moderate” option. One respondent (11.1%) chose the “significant” option.

Table 14 is a display of the results from the initial and final questionnaires.
Table 14: Perception of School’s Response to Struggling Readers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher’s responses about the extent to which the school is addressing needs of struggling readers</th>
<th>none</th>
<th>slight</th>
<th>moderate</th>
<th>significant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial Survey Results:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General population of students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Partners students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Survey Results:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General population of students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban Partners students</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It appears that the teachers still have slightly less confidence in the school’s ability to address the needs of the Urban Partners students than in the school’s ability to address the needs of the general population of students. However, their perceptions have increased for both populations; further, the gap has narrowed between the perceptions of the school’s ability to address the needs of the Urban Partners students and the needs of the general population.

The data in Table 14 suggest that the combination of the professional development about RTI and the application of RTI components to the instructional practices of the school resulted in an increase in the teachers’ beliefs about their capacity to instruct Urban Partners students. This data supports the benefits of RTI (specifically in relation to the three components which the school implemented) and the professional development which accompanied the initiative (with its emphasis on content which is research-based, process which includes reflection and dialogue, and context which is job-embedded).
Topic 3: The reasons some students have difficulty learning to read

Two of the survey questions asked the teachers to indicate the degree (on a scale of 0 – 3) to which various factors contribute to a struggling student’s difficulty with learning to read. Twenty-one factors were listed. The first of these two questions asked teachers to assess these factors with regard to the general population of students in the school. The second question asked teachers to respond with regard to the struggling readers who are Urban Partners students. Within each of these questions, six factors identified specific reading skills. Four factors related to the students’ experiences outside of school. Five factors focused on influences of culture, language, gender, socio-economic, and development. One factor focused on parental involvement. Five factors focused on the school’s curriculum and instruction. Tables 15 and 16 display these results.

Table 15, Factors Contributing to the Difficulties of Struggling Readers, illustrates the teachers’ perceptions of the reasons for which some students struggle to learn to read, by displaying the rating average for each of the twenty-one factors. A rating average is a weighted average of the responses. A response of “none” generated a value of “0”; “slight” generated a value of “1”; “moderate” generated a value of “2”; “significant” generated a value of “3”.
Table 15: Factors Contributing to the Difficulties of Struggling Readers
(Data gathered at the end of the study)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>General Population Rating Average</th>
<th>Urban Partners Rating Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lack of phonemic awareness...</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of phonics skills...</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak reading fluency...</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limited vocabulary...</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak oral language skills...</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak comprehension skills...</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of life experiences...</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of background knowledge...</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of early literacy experiences...</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of pre-school experiences...</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cultural influences...</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linguistic influences...</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>socio-economic influences...</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gender influences...</td>
<td></td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>developmental issues...</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limited parental involvement...</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the district's curriculum is not age-appropriate...</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of sufficient instructional strategies...</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of access to early intervention...</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inadequate reading instructional time...</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inadequate instructional materials...</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 16 shows the rating average for each population of students and the difference between the two rating averages.

Table 16: Comparison of Rating Averages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>General Population Rating Average</th>
<th>Urban Partners Rating Average</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lack of phonemic awareness</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of phonics skills</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak reading fluency</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limited vocabulary</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak oral language skills</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak comprehension skills</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of life experiences</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of background knowledge</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of early literacy experiences</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of pre-school experiences</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cultural influences</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linguistic influences</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>socio-economic influences</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gender influences</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>developmental issues</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limited parental involvement</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the district's curriculum is not age-appropriate</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of sufficient instructional strategies</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of access to early intervention</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inadequate reading instructional time</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inadequate instructional materials</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results in Table 16 indicate that there was still a significant discrepancy in the teachers’ perceptions of the influence of “lack of background knowledge” and “limited parental involvement” between the general population and the Urban Partners students,
with the teachers attributing a far greater (more than one point difference) influence of these two factors on the struggles of the Urban Partners students than on the general population of students who struggle. Further, the teachers saw almost no difference regarding the effect of the district’s curriculum, their instructional strategies, instructional time, or instructional materials on the performance of these two groups of students.

However, there were some changes between the initial and final questionnaires. Table 17 provides a comparison of the rating averages between the initial and final questionnaires.

Table 17: Comparison of Rating Averages between Initial Survey and Final Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>General Population</th>
<th>Urban Partners</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Initial</td>
<td>Final</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of phonemic awareness</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of phonics skills</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak reading fluency</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limited vocabulary</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak oral language skills</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak comprehension skills</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of life experiences</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of background knowledge</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of early literacy experiences</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of pre-school experiences</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cultural influences</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linguistic influences</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>socio-economic influences</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gender influences</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>developmental issues</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limited parental involvement</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the district’s curriculum is not age-appropriate</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of sufficient instructional strategies</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of access to early intervention</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inadequate reading instructional time</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inadequate instructional materials</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 17 shows that, when asked about the Urban Partners students, the teachers attributed less influence from lack of parental involvement at the end of the initiative than they did at the beginning. There were also slight decreases in their perceptions of the influence from other experiences outside of school (lack of life experiences, lack of background knowledge, lack of early literacy experiences, and lack of pre-school experiences). It is possible that the RTI initiative, along with the discussions about the needs of Urban Partners students, resulted in somewhat increased confidence that the school could address these needs.

Further, the teachers attributed less influence from inadequate instructional time, for both the general population of struggling readers and the Urban Partners struggling readers. This data reveals that the teachers believe that the school’s RTI model is providing more instructional time for those who need it.

Taken together, these two findings represent an increase in the teachers’ confidence in the school’s ability to address the needs of struggling Urban Partners students.

Another lens into changes in the teachers’ perceptions can be achieved by analyzing any changes in the differences between the responses in relation to the factors for the general population and the Urban Partners students. Table 18 compares the results from Table 9 and Table 16, to display the degree to which there were changes in the teachers’ responses at the beginning and the end of the study. For example, on the initial survey, the teachers attributed far more influence (a difference of 1.4 points) to the lack of parental involvement on the struggles of Urban Partners students than on the struggles of the general population of students. On the final survey, this difference
decreased to 1.1 points, a decline of .3 points. It is possible, therefore, that the RTI initiative began to give the teachers more confidence in the school’s capacity to address the needs of the Urban Partners students, and less tendency to believe that the lack of parental involvement was an intractable problem.

Table 18: Change between Initial and Final Surveys, in Difference between General Population and Urban Partners Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difference between GP &amp; UP</th>
<th>Initial Survey</th>
<th>Final Survey</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>lack of phonemic awareness</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of phonics skills</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak reading fluency</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limited vocabulary</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak oral language skills</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak comprehension skills</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of life experiences</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of background knowledge</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of early literacy experiences</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of pre-school experiences</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cultural influences</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linguistic influences</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>socio-economic influences</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gender influences</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>developmental issues</td>
<td>-0.4</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>limited parental involvement</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the district’s curriculum is not age-appropriate</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of sufficient instructional strategies</td>
<td>-0.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lack of access to early intervention</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inadequate reading instructional time</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
<td>-0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>inadequate instructional materials</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data in Table 18 shows a slightly decreased discrepancy in the factors pertaining to experiences outside of school: lack of life experiences, lack of background knowledge, lack of early literacy experiences, and lack of pre-school experiences. This
data supports the notion that the teachers are gaining somewhat greater confidence in the school’s ability to address these needs.

With respect to cultural and linguistic influences, there is a greater difference in the final survey, suggesting that the teachers achieved a greater interest in investigating the impact of cultural and linguistic influences.

Finally, there is an increase in the difference with respect to early intervention, suggesting that the teachers believe that RTI will provide the early intervention which will help these students.

*Topic 4: Possible solutions to address the issue of struggling readers*

Another question asked, “What solutions are effective? Please indicate the degree to which you believe each of the following solutions will help (or has helped).” The choices for each solution were “not at all”, “slight”, “moderate”, and “significant”. Table 19 displays the rating average for these responses, based upon a scale of 0 – 3.
The data in Table 19 reveals that the teachers attribute a significant benefit from small group instruction for all students. Table 20 compares the data from the initial and final questionnaires.
The data in Table 20 reveals that the teachers dramatically increased their interest in connecting with parents regarding instruction. There was a slight increase in the importance placed upon access to information about culturally diverse learners and a slight decrease in the importance placed upon access to information about linguistically diverse learners. This finding contradicts the finding from Table 18, which suggested that the teachers were more interested in investigating information about teaching culturally and linguistically diverse learners. It appears that there is not yet a firm commitment in this direction.
**Topic 5: Professional development**

The final question asked, “What types of professional development regarding the components of RTI have been (or could be, in the future) most beneficial to you? Please rate the extent to which you believe each of these types of professional development is beneficial.” Table 21 is a comparison of the results at the beginning and end of the study, indicating the rating averages on a scale of 0 - 3.

Table 21: Comparison of Professional Development Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Initial Survey</th>
<th>Final Survey</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>attending conferences about RTI</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attending workshops about RTI</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reading articles about RTI</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>reading selections from books about RTI</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discussing RTI strategies with grade-level colleagues</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discussing RTI strategies with cross-grade-level colleagues</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discussing RTI strategies with specialists</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>participating in RTI study groups</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keeping a reflective journal about your experiences with RTI</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hearing presentations about RTI during staff meetings</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>-0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This data reveals that the teachers continue to be enthusiastic about all aspects of professional development, with the exception of keeping reflective journals (which was not part of the initiative). The greatest increase is seen with regards to reading articles about RTI, indicating that they found the research-based content to be extremely helpful.

One teacher summed up her responses by stating, “It’s important to read about RTI and then discuss the information and how it relates to Beech School at a staff
meeting”. The teachers are again supporting research-based content, the process of reflection and dialogue, and a job-embedded context.

**Summary of findings in relation to the research questions**

This qualitative case study focused on a Response to Intervention initiative in a suburban elementary school. The initiative incorporated professional development about RTI and implementation of components of an RTI model. The researcher analyzed teachers’ feedback regarding the professional development and the RTI model, as the initiative developed, with a specific focus on the teachers’ perceptions about the impact on their success with urban students of color who are part of a voluntary desegregation program. The findings that emerged from the data collected through two computer-based questionnaires, one focus group meeting, individual interviews with each study participant, and three feedback forms suggest that the combination of professional development about RTI, application of RTI to the school setting, and conversations and questions about addressing the needs of these students resulted in increased teacher confidence in their ability to effectively instruct these students. This section will discuss the findings as they relate to each of the following research questions:

1. To what extent did each professional development component of the RTI initiative influence teachers’:
   a. implementation of the RTI approach?
   b. perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students?

2. Which components of the RTI model did teachers:
   a. use during participation in the RTI initiative?
b. identify as being successful with struggling Urban Partners students?

3. How did participating in the Response to Intervention initiative affect teachers’ perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students?

The findings are divided into three parts:

- Part I focuses on the professional development components, responding to the first research question.
- Part II focuses on the components of RTI, in response to the second research question.
- Part III focuses on the overall impact of the RTI initiative on teachers’ perceptions, in response to the third research question, and summarizes the findings from all three questions.

**Part I: Professional Development Components of the RTI Initiative**

With respect to the professional development components and their impact on teachers’ understanding about RTI (Question 1a), the researcher focused on the *content, process, and context* recommendations for professional development in *professional learning communities*. These recommendations state that the content should be research-based, the process should include reflection and dialogue, and the context should be job-embedded. The findings of this study indicate that the *combination of and the interaction among* these three elements, within a *sustained* ongoing series of professional development activities, resulted in significantly increased understanding about RTI. The teachers expressed equal amounts of enthusiasm for the various formats and settings of professional development utilized during the initiative (staff meetings,
professional development days, workshops, readings, discussions, applications, etc.), emphasizing the importance of the research-based content, the process of reflection and dialogue, and the job-embedded context.

With respect to the professional development components and their impact on teachers’ perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students (Question 1b), the researcher was focused on the same three components of professional development (content, process, and context). The findings indicate that the teachers believed that they learned about RTI as a way to better address the needs of all students, and therefore learned how to better address the needs of struggling Urban Partners students. They did not identify any component of the professional development which specifically addressed these students’ needs. However, several teachers mentioned the focus group meeting, which was part of this study, as an element which helped them to think about the particular needs of this group of students. Therefore, it appears that, while the focus group discussion, as part of this study, was not part of the school-wide professional development for the RTI initiative, it became another form of professional development for the teachers who were participants in the study. This finding reveals that professional development which is restricted solely to RTI does not specifically help teachers learn about teaching urban students of color. However, raising the question about instructing these students and engaging in a discussion about the topic contributed to teachers’ increased understanding and interest in receiving professional development to expand their knowledge.
PART II: Components of the RTI Model

With respect to the components of the RTI model which were implemented during the RTI initiative (Question 2a), the findings of this study indicate that the school implemented assessment, Class TATs, and interventions during this year of the initiative. With respect to the components of RTI which teachers identified as being successful with Urban Partners students (Question 2b), the findings indicate that the teachers believed that, since RTI addresses the needs of all struggling readers, it helps with UP students. Some teachers identified the assessments and the interventions as particularly being successful with these students. Some teachers, however, questioned whether RTI was enough to address their complicated needs. Further, at the end of the study, there remained a substantial, yet slightly decreased, difference between the teachers’ perceptions of the influence from outside factors on the reading difficulties of Urban Partners students compared to their perceptions about these influences on the reading difficulties of the general population of students. These findings suggest that additional components specific to the needs of UP students should be added to the RTI model.

Part III: The effect of the RTI initiative on teachers’ perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students

With respect to the effect of the RTI initiative on teachers’ perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students (Question 3), the researcher combined the responses from questions 1 and 2 to answer this question. The findings in questions 1 and 2 indicate that the RTI initiative itself gave teachers more confidence in their ability to help all struggling readers, therefore giving them increased confidence in
helping Urban Partners students. According to the teachers, the professional
development and the initiative did not specifically address the particular needs of the
Urban Partners students. However, a comparison of the teacher responses on the initial
and final questionnaires about their perceptions of the reasons that the UP students
struggle reveal changes in this area. Further, a comparison of their responses about the
school’s ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students reveal increased confidence
in this area, too. Therefore, it appears that the combination of three elements (effective
professional development about RTI, application of RTI to the school setting, and
specific conversations about addressing the needs of UP students) resulted in increased
teacher confidence in their ability to instruct these students. Further, the interaction of
these three elements resulted in identification of next steps which will specifically
address their needs: literacy blocks, an RTI tool-kit as a resource for teachers and parents,
stronger home-school partnership, and increased teacher knowledge about working with
urban students of color.

Despite these increases in confidence and identification of next steps, there
remained substantial differences in teachers’ perceptions regarding the reasons some UP
students struggle as compared to the reasons attributed to the struggles of some general
population students. Therefore, it appears that additional components should be added to
the RTI model and the associated professional development.

Conclusion

As the teachers gained more knowledge about RTI, they also began to believe that
the school was more adequately addressing the needs of struggling learners, especially
the Urban Partners struggling learners. Simultaneously, they attributed slightly less influence to the lack of parental involvement and other outside factors. It appeared that the teachers gained more confidence in the school’s ability to help these students at the same time as they gained more knowledge about RTI and as the school implemented components of RTI during this initiative. However, several teachers questioned whether RTI was adequate to address the complex issues of the Urban Partners students. They recognized that they needed more information about effective instructional strategies to match the learning profiles of this population of students and that they needed to strengthen their connections with the parents of these students.

Chapter Five will present comments on the meaning of these findings, specifically in relation to the literature review presented in Chapter Two, which revolved around three themes: *Response to Intervention, culturally responsive teaching, and professional development in professional learning communities*. Chapter Five also will focus on the implications of the findings, regarding RTI, regarding the education of students of color, and regarding professional development for teachers.
Chapter Five: Summary, Discussion, Implications, Reflections

Introduction

In Chapter Five, the participant-researcher will summarize the findings and comment on their meaning, specifically in relation to the literature review presented in Chapter Two, which revolved around three themes: *Response to Intervention*, *culturally responsive teaching*, and *professional development in professional learning communities*. In this chapter, the researcher will discuss the implications of the findings as they pertain to Response to Intervention, the education of students of color, and effective professional development for teachers. This chapter will also include the participant-researcher’s reflections about leadership and how these views were impacted by this study.

Summary of findings

This qualitative case study focused on a Response to Intervention (RTI) literacy initiative at Beech School, a suburban elementary school near a large urban area in New England. The initiative incorporated professional development about RTI and implementation of components of an RTI model. The researcher analyzed teachers’ feedback regarding the professional development and the RTI model, as the initiative developed, with a specific focus on the teachers’ perceptions about the initiative’s impact on their success with urban students of color who are part of a voluntary desegregation program (Urban Partners). The findings that emerged from the data collected through two computer-based questionnaires, one focus group meeting, individual interviews with each study participant, and three feedback forms suggested that the combination of professional development about RTI, implementation of RTI in the school setting, and conversations and questions about addressing the needs of this population of students
resulted in increased teacher confidence in their ability to provide effective instruction to all of their struggling readers. The research questions were:

1. To what extent did each professional development component of the RTI initiative influence teachers’:
   a. implementation of the RTI approach?
   b. perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students?

2. Which components of the RTI model did teachers:
   a. use during participation in the RTI initiative?
   b. identify as being successful with struggling Urban Partners students?

3. How did participating in the Response to Intervention initiative affect teachers’ perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students?

The findings are divided into three parts:

- Part I focuses on the professional development components, in response to the first research question.
- Part II focuses on the components of RTI, in response to the second research question.
- Part III focuses on the overall impact of the RTI initiative on teachers’ perceptions, in response to the third research question, and summarizes the findings from all three questions.

**Part I: Professional Development Components of the RTI Initiative**

With respect to the professional development components and their impact on teachers’ understanding about RTI (Question 1a), the participant-researcher focused on the *content, process, and context* recommendations for professional development in
professional learning communities. These recommendations state that the content should be research-based, the process should include reflection and dialogue, and the context should be job-embedded. The findings of this study indicated that the combination of and the interaction among these three elements, within a sustained ongoing series of professional development activities, resulted in significantly increased understanding about RTI. The teachers expressed equal amounts of enthusiasm for the various formats and settings of professional development utilized during the initiative (staff meetings, professional development days, workshops, readings, discussions, applications, etc.), emphasizing the importance of the research-based content, the process of reflection and dialogue, and the job-embedded context.

With respect to the professional development components and their impact on teachers’ perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling UP (Urban Partners) students (Question 1b), the researcher was focused on the same three components of professional development (content, process, and context). The findings indicated that the teachers believed that they learned about RTI as a way to better address the needs of all students, and therefore they learned how better to address the needs of struggling Urban Partners students. They did not identify any component of the professional development which specifically addressed the UP students’ needs. However, several teachers mentioned the focus group meeting, which was part of this study, as an element which helped them to think about the particular needs of this group of students. Therefore, it appears that, while the focus group discussion, as part of this study, was not part of the school-wide professional development for the RTI initiative, it became another form of professional development for the teachers who were participants in the study. This finding revealed
that the professional development which was restricted solely to RTI did not specifically help teachers learn about teaching students of color. However, raising the question about instructing these students and engaging in a discussion about the topic contributed to teachers’ increased understanding and interest in receiving professional development about this issue.

PART II: Components of the RTI Model

With respect to the components of the RTI model which were implemented during the RTI initiative (Question 2a), the findings of this study indicated that the teachers identified assessments, Class TATs, and interventions as being implemented during this first year of the initiative. The assessments were a combination of norm-referenced and criterion-referenced measures. The Class TAT (Teacher Assistance Team) meetings were held to look at the assessment data for each class and discuss the progress of struggling readers. The interventions included general classroom instruction, small group lessons, and individual instruction.

With respect to the components of RTI which teachers identified as being successful with Urban Partners students (Question 2b), the findings indicated that the teachers believed that, since RTI addressed the needs of all struggling readers, it helped with UP students. Some teachers identified the assessments and the interventions as particularly being successful with these students. Some teachers, however, questioned whether RTI was enough to address the complicated needs of UP students. Further, at the end of the study, there remained a substantial, yet slightly decreased, difference between the teachers’ perceptions of the influence from outside factors on the reading
difficulties of Urban Partners students compared to their perceptions about these influences on the reading difficulties of the general population of students. These findings suggested that additional components specific to the needs of UP students should be added to the RTI model.

**Part III: The effect of the RTI initiative on teachers’ perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students**

With respect to the effect of the RTI initiative on teachers’ perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students (Question 3), the researcher combined the responses from questions 1 and 2 to answer this question. The findings in questions 1 and 2 indicated that the RTI initiative itself gave teachers more confidence in their ability to help all struggling readers, therefore giving them increased confidence in helping Urban Partners students. According to the teachers, the professional development and the initiative did not specifically address the particular needs of the Urban Partners students. However, a comparison of the teacher responses on the initial and final questionnaires about their perceptions of the reasons that the UP students struggle revealed changes in this area. Further, a comparison of their responses about the school’s ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students revealed increased confidence in this area, also. Therefore, it appeared that the combination of three elements (effective professional development about RTI, application of RTI to the school setting, and specific conversations about addressing the needs of UP students) resulted in increased teacher confidence in their ability to instruct these students. Further, the interaction of these three elements resulted in identification of next steps which will
specifically address their needs: literacy blocks, an RTI tool-kit as a resource for teachers and parents, stronger home-school partnership, and increased teacher knowledge about working with urban students of color.

Despite these increases in confidence and identification of next steps, there remained substantial differences in teachers’ perceptions regarding the reasons some UP students struggle as compared to the reasons attributed to the struggles of some general population students. Therefore, it appeared that additional components should be added to the RTI model and the associated professional development.

**Summary of findings**

As the teachers gained more knowledge about RTI, they also began to believe that the school was more adequately addressing the needs of struggling learners, especially the Urban Partners struggling learners. Simultaneously, they attributed less influence to the lack of parental involvement and to other factors outside of the school. It appeared that the teachers gained more confidence in the school’s ability to help these students at the same time as they gained more knowledge about RTI and as the school implemented components of RTI during this initiative. These findings suggested that the *combination* of professional development about RTI, application of RTI to the school setting, and conversations and questions about addressing the needs of Urban Partners students resulted in increased teacher confidence in their ability to provide effective instruction to these students. However, there remained differences in their views about the school’s effectiveness with Urban Partners students and several teachers recognized that they
needed more information about effective instructional strategies to match the learning profiles of this population of students.

**Discussion of the findings**

**Response to Intervention**

Response to Intervention, or RTI, recently has become a popular model utilized to address the needs of struggling learners. The Harvard Education Letter included an article in its January/February 2007 issue which described RTI as a “new approach to reading instruction (which) aims to catch struggling readers early” (Walser, 2007, p. 1). RTI proponents cite federal legislation and social science literature as justification for its implementation. It is a major component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004), which permits districts to use as much as 15% of federal Special Education funds for early intervention. This act specifies that, for the purpose of determining that a child has a learning disability, a school may implement a procedure which documents how a child responds to interventions as part of its evaluation process (Bender & Shores, 2007, p. 1). Several states have developed their own RTI models, some incorporating three tiers of intervention, others with as many as six tiers (Bender & Shores, 2007, p. 23).

Response to Intervention serves two main purposes: 1) to provide early intervention for all children at risk for school failure and 2) to identify children with learning disabilities. At Beech School, the RTI initiative focused on the first main purpose: to provide early intervention. As the initiative progressed, the school began to
incorporate the second main purpose, using data from RTI as part of its identification of children with learning disabilities.

As described by Fuchs and Fuchs (2006), the “R” in RTI refers to students’ responsiveness to instruction and intervention, according to norm-referenced or criterion-referenced measures. Children are assessed regularly after periods of instruction and intervention, thus providing data which educators can use both to design early intervention and to identify special needs students. Beech School used both types of measures: norm-referenced and criterion-referenced. All children were assessed in the fall, winter, and spring, using a combination of literacy assessments which the school had formalized as its “Language Arts Assessment Framework” two years prior to this initiative. Those students who were receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 interventions were assessed more frequently.

As described by Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) the “I” in RTI refers to multi-tiered interventions, utilizing either the “problem-solving approach” or the “standard treatment protocol approach”. Various versions of RTI utilize three to six tiers of instruction, becoming more intensive as students move up the tiers. The interventions serve both purposes of RTI: to provide early intervention and to identify special needs students. Stated another way, RTI is a “systematic and data-based method for identifying, defining, and resolving students’ academic and/or behavioral difficulties” (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2005, p. 2). Beech School’s RTI model utilized three tiers: Tier 1 was general classroom instruction; Tier 2 added interventions two – three times per week; Tier 3 supplied more intensive interventions, three – five times per week.
There are two distinct RTI models: the problem-solving model and the standard treatment protocol model. The structures of these models are similar, but the processes of determining and evaluating the results of the educational interventions are different. The problem-solving approach utilizes interventions designed for individual student needs. For each child, the assessments and interventions are personalized. By contrast, the standard treatment protocol approach involves interventions designed for small groups of students experiencing the same academic problem. The treatment usually involves a specific program delivered in small groups or individually for a fixed amount of time.

Both models require three basic elements: interventions which are research-based, frequent assessment (progress monitoring), and measures to assure fidelity of the intervention and assessment (Bender & Shores, 2007, pp. 8-15; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Of these three basic elements, the second element (progress-monitoring) was the element which received the most attention during this first year of Beech School’s RTI initiative.

In comparing the two models, Fuchs & Fuchs (2006) indicate that practitioners are more likely to use the problem-solving approach, but researchers are more likely to follow standard treatment protocols. They acknowledge that researchers have not yet explored the two approaches within the same experimental design. Standard treatment protocol is a relatively rigorous test for disability, leading to more rigorous identification (possibly false negatives); problem solving is less intensive and less systematic, potentially leading to less rigorous identification (some false positives), but may help prevent further learning problems (pp. 94 – 97). The school in this case study utilized a problem-solving approach with a focus on literacy. The findings revealed that the problem-solving approach to RTI was effective in improving teachers’ perceptions of
their ability to instruct struggling readers. This finding suggested that a problem-solving approach may be a good match for a school which seeks an RTI model which focuses on early intervention for all struggling readers, thereby preventing further learning problems.

With respect to the components of the RTI model which were implemented during the RTI initiative (Question 2a), the findings of this study indicate that the school implemented assessments, Class TATs, and interventions during this year of the initiative. The assessments and Class TATs can be grouped under the term “progress monitoring”, one of the key elements of an RTI model. The findings of the study revealed that a progress-monitoring structure with consistent assessments and Class TATs can be effective in increasing teachers’ perceptions of the school’s effectiveness with struggling readers.

With respect to the components of RTI which teachers identified as being successful with Urban Partners students (Question 2b), the findings indicated that the teachers believed that, since RTI addressed the needs of all struggling readers, it helped with UP students. Some teachers identified the assessments and the interventions as particularly being successful with these students, but did not mention the Class TATs in response to this question. Some teachers, however, questioned whether RTI was enough to address their complicated needs. They recognized that they needed more information about effective instructional strategies to match the learning profiles of this population of students. These findings suggested that additional components specific to the needs of UP students should be added to the RTI model and its associated professional development.
Despite its increasing popularity, there are many questions and issues regarding RTI. Bender and Shores (2007) contend that it has been untested for effectiveness in determining eligibility for special education, but there is evidence for use of RTI as a progress-monitoring tool for all students, with or without disabilities (p. 1). The findings from this study were consistent with this contention, since the teachers identified the progress-monitoring elements of RTI (the assessments and Class TATs) as being effective with their students.

Bender and Shores (2007) point out that many practitioners have not had direct experience with RTI because few states have developed methods for implementing the new federal regulations, which went into effect in August 2006 (p. 4). During the year of this study, the state in which the study was conducted had not yet developed a method for implementing these regulations. Therefore, this school was in a position to design its own model.

Based upon this analysis in relation to the professional literature on Response to Intervention, the RTI literacy initiative, which utilized the problem solving structure and which focused on progress-monitoring and interventions, did increase teachers’ confidence in their ability to address the needs of struggling readers. However, it is important to emphasize that this initiative was accompanied by significant ongoing professional development. Based upon the teachers’ growth in their understanding of RTI, it is evident that, in the early stages of the RTI initiative, ongoing professional development was essential. It was not sufficient merely to provide a few workshops over a short period of time, since the teachers reported only minimal understanding about RTI after only a few workshops and only limited implementation of RTI practices. This
initiative took place over the course of an entire school year. Sustained professional
development, which incorporated research-based content, process which included
reflection and dialogue, and a job-embedded context, also took place throughout the
school year. The topic of professional development will be discussed in depth later in
this chapter.

Further analysis revealed that the results were mixed regarding the teachers’
confidence with respect to RTI’s effect on their instruction with Urban Partners students.
Some teachers questioned whether RTI was enough to address the complicated needs of
these students. This dimension of an effective Response to Intervention model will be
discussed in the next section of this chapter.

*Culturally responsive teaching*

According to Geneva Gay (2000), *culturally responsive teaching* uses “the
cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of
ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for
them” (p. 29). She makes a compelling argument, supported by research, for improving
student achievement through curriculum and instruction which directly respond to the
cultural diversity in society and in our schools. Culture plays a critical role in relation to
student attitudes and achievement. She contends that it is imperative that teachers
“understand how their own and their students’ cultures affect the educational process” (p.
9) and place “culture at the center of the analysis of techniques for improving the
performance of underachieving students of color” (p. 10). Viewed through this lens,
Beech School’s RTI model can effectively address the needs of Urban Partners students
*only* if it places culture at the center, in terms of both its assessment and its interventions.
Gay (2000) asserts that there are key roles and responsibilities for teachers within the framework of culturally responsive pedagogy. Teachers must be cultural organizers, who recognize that culture affects classroom dynamics and who incorporate this factor into teaching and learning. Teachers must be cultural mediators, who create classroom communities in which culturally diverse learners celebrate and affirm each other. Teachers must be orchestrators of social contexts for learning, who match their teaching processes with the sociocultural contexts of ethnically diverse students (pp. 42 – 43).

Viewed through this lens, Beech School’s RTI model can effectively address the needs of Urban Partners students only if culture is at the center of Beech School’s instruction. Within an RTI model, Tier 1 consists of the regular classroom instruction. In order to provide adequate opportunity to learn for Urban Partners students, the general educational program (Tier 1) should incorporate culturally responsive curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

Following a framework of culturally responsive teaching, curriculum content should be culturally diverse. Ethnically diverse students need to feel empowered through academic success, cultural affiliation and personal efficacy. “Knowledge in the form of curriculum content is central to this empowerment” (Gay 2000, p. 111). Teachers must match their instructional strategies to the learning styles of these students. Gay claims, “Establishing congruity between different aspects of the learning processes of ethnically diverse students and the instructional strategies used by classroom teachers is essential to improving their academic achievement” (p. 148). For example, she recommends instructional strategies, such as cooperative learning, which have a positive effect on achievement, since students learn when they are actively and effectively engaged.
Viewed through this lens, Beech School should match its curriculum and instruction to the cultural diversity of the students. Several of the teachers recognized the advantages of incorporating this component into the RTI model and specifically requested professional development in this area.

Teachers also need to appreciate the importance of language in the learning process; as Gay (2000) contends, “languages and communication styles are systems of cultural notations and the means through which thoughts and ideas are expressively embodied” (p. 81). Viewed through this lens, Beech School’s RTI model must incorporate the needs of linguistically diverse students.

Teachers need to convey the message that they care about and set high expectations for ethnically diverse students. Gay (2000) outlines research findings which highlight several key persistent trends in teacher expectations and offer insights into the changes needed to improve achievement of ethnically diverse students:

1. Teacher expectations significantly influence the quality of learning opportunities provided to students.
2. Teacher expectations about students are affected by factors that have no basis in fact and may persist even in the face of contrary evidence.
3. Assumptions about connections among the intellectual capability, ethnicity, gender, and classroom adjustment of students attest to the tenacity of teacher expectations, even in the face of contrary evidence.
4. Teachers tend to have higher universal academic expectations for European Americans than for students of color, with the exception of some Asian Americans.
5. Teachers’ expectations and sense of professional efficacy are interrelated (pp. 57–60).

This last point has direct implications for this research study, which focused on teachers’ perceptions of their ability to instruct struggling students. Gay (2000) contends, “teaching efficacy stems from the beliefs teacher hold about their abilities to positively affect the academic achievement of particular students” (p. 60). She states that teachers frequently attribute student failure to lack of intellectual ability or to a poor home environment rather than to poor teaching. However, studies suggest that teachers’ own low levels of efficacy contribute to the failure to learn experienced by some students. Gay concludes that “changing teachers’ attitudes, expectations, and feelings of efficacy is as imperative to the design and implementation of effective culturally responsive teaching as is increasing their knowledge about and commitment to cultural diversity and mastery of related pedagogical skills” (p. 62). In this study, the RTI initiative increased teachers’ confidence in the school’s ability to instruct the struggling readers who were Urban Partners students. The initiative also appeared to lessen the degree to which teachers attributed the students’ difficulties to their experiences outside of school. At the end of the study, when asked about the Urban Partners students, the teachers attributed less influence from lack of parental involvement than they did at the beginning. There were also slight decreases in their perceptions of the influence from other experiences outside of school (lack of life experiences, lack of background knowledge, lack of early literacy experiences, and lack of pre-school experiences).

However, there were still differences between the teachers’ views related to the general population of students and their views related to the Urban Partners students. It
will be important to capitalize on this small change in perception by providing teachers with specific information about culturally responsive teaching. Some of the teachers requested professional development in this area. As one of the teachers voiced, she would like to “look at the research, have reflection and dialogue, and share” information about effective strategies with this population of students, just as the staff did with respect to RTI.

Klinger and Edwards (2006) present a framework for culturally responsive literacy instruction which draws upon the work of Wiley (1996). They describe three courses of action for working with students and families: accommodation, incorporation, and adaptation. *Accommodation* requires that educators connect with and understand the communication styles and literacy practices of their students and include them in their instruction. *Incorporation* requires educators to value community practices and acknowledge that they can learn from other ethnic groups. *Adaptation* requires that schools assist parents in their efforts to help their children acquire the skills they need to meet the school’s expectations (p. 109). They contend that these three courses of action are necessary when implementing evidence-based interventions. “Central to our approach is the belief that instructional methods do not work or fail as decontextualized generic practices, but only in relation to the sociocultural contexts in which they are implemented” (p. 110). Viewed through this lens, Beech School should *accommodate* the communication styles and literacy practices of its diverse students. For example, the staff should find ways to build upon the foundation of literacy learning that begins in the home. The school should *incorporate* and learn from the practices of its ethnic groups, by reaching out to culturally diverse families and incorporating diverse cultures into the
curriculum. As asserted by Delpit (2003), “students must be allowed the resource of the teacher’s expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their own ‘expertness’ as well” (p. 187). In addition, the school should adapt by assisting parents in their efforts to help their children meet the school’s expectations. For example, the staff should provide specific information and strategies to parents so that they feel empowered to help their children at home. This recommendation is aligned with the perspective of Delpit (2003), who proposes five aspects of power, one of which states that “if you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier” (p. 169). The publication, Addressing Over-Representation of African American Students in Special Education: The Prereferral Intervention Process (2002), provides specific recommendations for communicating with families about their child’s educational needs. These recommendations include regular communication with parents about student accomplishments, providing professional development for staff in effective communication skills, and planning school-wide and district-wide activities with input from parents (p. 34).

Klinger & Edwards (2006) present a possible RTI model for culturally and linguistically diverse students. It incorporates evidence-based interventions and “culturally responsive attributes” (p. 113). They conclude that RTI models are in danger of becoming merely another deficit-based approach and that “the most effective interventions for culturally and linguistically diverse students will come from bringing together diverse perspectives, and from careful examination of notions about disability and cultural diversity within their full sociocultural and historical contexts” (p. 115). Viewed through this lens, Beech School should incorporate “culturally responsive
attributes” as it further refines its RTI model. In order to do this, teachers will need to gain an understanding of culturally responsive teaching.

The findings of this case study indicated that the RTI initiative itself gave teachers more confidence in their ability to help all struggling readers, therefore giving them increased confidence in their ability to help Urban Partners students succeed. According to the teachers, the professional development and the initiative did not specifically address the particular needs of the Urban Partners students; some of them made a request for professional development which would address these needs. However, a comparison of the teacher responses on the initial and final questionnaires about their perceptions of the reasons that the UP students struggle revealed changes in this area. Further, a comparison of their responses about the school’s ability to instruct struggling Urban Partners students reveal increased confidence in this area, also. Therefore, it appears that the combination of three elements (effective professional development about RTI, application of RTI to the school setting, and specific conversations about addressing the needs of UP students) resulted in increased teacher confidence in their ability to instruct these students. Further, the interaction of these three elements resulted in identification of next steps which will specifically address their needs: literacy blocks, an RTI tool-kit as a resource for teachers and parents, stronger home-school partnership, and increased teacher knowledge about working with urban students of color. However, it appeared that the RTI initiative would have had a greater impact on the teachers’ feelings of efficacy if professional development about culturally responsive teaching had been part of the initiative.
Combining the results of this case study with the recommendations of the professional literature about culturally responsive teaching, it is evident that Response to Intervention has the potential to address the learning needs of urban students of color, but only if practitioners incorporate the basic principles of culturally responsive teaching. Several teachers in the study voiced a desire to learn ways to better address the needs of the Urban Partners students. However, the results were mixed regarding the extent to which the teachers were convinced that cultural and linguistic factors are important. The RTI initiative and the professional development made progress in this area, but professional development which raises awareness about cultural and linguistic influences, and which addresses the particular needs of students of color, is necessary to truly address all the challenges of helping these students succeed.

Based upon their responses in this case study, the teachers were seeking information about strategies to address the achievement gap. The next section will discuss the components of effective professional development and highlight methods which could be used to provide teachers with this information.

**Professional development in professional learning communities**

The third theme of this study is *professional development in a professional learning community*. Professional development has the potential to help teachers acquire new skills, techniques, and understandings to become more proficient educators and therefore significantly increase student achievement. However, in many instances, there are questions regarding the impact of professional development on teacher expertise and student learning. The No Child Left Behind Act sets high standards for professional development and requires that programs be evaluated for their impact on teaching.
practices and student achievement. However, “research on the effects of professional
development on teachers’ classroom practice is often inconclusive or contradictory, and
there is little agreement about which specific features of these programs are key to their
effectiveness” (Seyfarth 2008, p. 124). In this study, the participant-researcher focused
on three features of professional development recommended for professional learning
communities: content which is based on research, process which includes reflection and
dialogue, and context which is job-embedded.

Several authors espouse professional learning communities as vehicles for
achieving the goals of effective professional development. In a Research Report about
learning culture is in place, teachers are more likely to participate in collaborative
activities and take collective responsibility for student learning” (p. 39). Hill and Crevola
(1999) include Professional Learning Teams on their Design for Improving Student
Outcomes (Figure 6.1, p. 123). They contend that “professional learning is most
powerful when it occurs within the context of teachers working as members of a team
and in pursuit of specific learning outcomes for students” (p. 130). Hargreaves (2003)
describes professional learning communities as structures which transform knowledge,
encourage shared inquiry, are informed by evidence, embrace uncertainty, utilize local
solutions, encourage joint responsibility, develop continuous learning, and promote
communities of practice (pp. 184 & 185).

Using the NSDC Standards for Staff Development (1995) as a guide, DuFour and
eaker (1998) developed the following criteria for effective professional development in a
professional learning community:
The content of effective staff development programs should:

- Be based on research.
- Focus on both generic and discipline-specific teaching skills.
- Expand the repertoire of teachers to meet the needs of students who learn in diverse ways.

The process of effective staff development should:

- Attend to the tenets of good teaching.
- Provide the ongoing coaching that is critical to the mastery of new skills.
- Result in reflection and dialogue on the part of participants.
- Be sustained over a considerable period of time.
- Be evaluated at several different levels, including evidence of improved student performance.

The context of effective staff development should:

- Be focused on individual schools and have strong support from the central office.
- Be job-embedded.
- Foster individual and organizational renewal. (pp. 276 – 277).

The project at Beech School incorporated several elements of staff development recommended for professional learning communities. For the study, the researcher evaluated one element within each of the categories of content, process, and context.

Within the content category, a staff development program should be based on research. Relevant background information and current thinking about the topic are
gathered in order to ensure that the innovation “makes a difference in teacher effectiveness and the success of students” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 263). The staff development program becomes a vehicle to make connections between research and practice. Beech School’s RTI initiative incorporated current information from the legal and social science literature about Response to Intervention; the study asked teachers to assess the extent to which this content contributed to the project in a positive way. The teachers responded very enthusiastically to the research-based content of the program, citing the professional journal articles they read as being critical to their significantly increased knowledge about RTI. In fact, with respect to professional development components, the greatest positive change (in terms of the rating average of responses) from the beginning to the end of the study was in response to the value of reading articles about RTI. This result, along with the comments from all teachers, underscored their belief that they benefitted from reading these professional articles.

In a professional learning community, the process of staff development results in reflection and dialogue. Staff development programs are “designed to develop thoughtful professionals who have the ability to assess and revise their own actions in order to improve the likelihood of success for their students” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 265). This RTI initiative included opportunities for reflection and dialogue, which are valuable since “creating small, supportive groups in which teachers are encouraged to discuss their questions, concerns, and ideas about a new program also enhances the successful implementation of a program” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 266). The results of the study indicated that the teachers were very enthusiastic about the reflection and dialogue in which they engaged during staff meetings and a professional development day. The final
survey showed the highest rating average for the components which involved discussion of RTI strategies with colleagues. Further, several of the teachers specifically mentioned the focus group meeting, which was part of the study, and not intended by the participant-researcher to be part of the professional development about RTI. The teachers found the focus group discussion about RTI and its impact on Urban Partners students to contribute to their understanding of the complexity of addressing the needs of this population of students.

In a professional learning community, the context of staff development is job-embedded. In contrast to the belief that educators learn through off-site training sessions, this view focuses on staff development within the daily work of educators. “Teachers are engaging in a powerful form of staff development each time they work together to develop curriculum and assessment strategies; engage in the ongoing cycle of inquiry, reflection, dialogue, action, analysis, and adjustments in order to improve results; and give one another feedback as they practice new skills” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 273). The teachers in this case study strongly supported this component of effective professional development, stating that the application of their learning to the school’s RTI model was essential to their understanding of RTI.

Based on the results of this study, it appeared that the combination of the three features under study (content which is based on research, process which includes reflection and dialogue, and context which is job-embedded) resulted in teachers’ belief that they gained significant knowledge about RTI during the course of the RTI initiative. It was clear that the professional development component of the initiative was critical to
not only the teachers’ increased knowledge, but also the teachers’ implementation of the model and their perceptions of its positive impact on students.

Limitations of the study

There are several limitations to this study.

• Because of the small number of teachers and of UP students, one cannot assume that the results represent all possible perspectives.

• This study took place at a single site within a single school year; it therefore cannot be generalized to all similar situations.

• This school was developing the RTI model during the project. The initiative was in its first year in the district; therefore the results cannot be generalized to models which are fully developed.

• The participants reflected a purposeful sample of volunteers, who may not necessarily represent all of the teachers who were involved in the initiative.

• The district was conducting a study of its literacy program, utilizing an outside team who was interviewing teachers and requesting that teachers complete questionnaires. This history could have affected teachers’ fatigue and/or enthusiasm for responding to additional interviews and questionnaires.

• The instruments and the initiative itself changed during the course of the study. As the researcher gathered and analyzed data, she made modifications to some of the questions in the instruments. As the
school reflected on its practices during the initiative, there were changes in its RTI model. These changes could have affected the results of the study, especially in relation to comparisons between the beginning and end of the study.

- The participant-researcher was the project leader and the principal of the school. Therefore, it is possible that teacher responses were affected by the fact that the researcher was also their supervisor and evaluator.

**Implications/recommendations for practice and policy**

Based upon this analysis, the researcher has several recommendations regarding Response to Intervention, professional development, and educating urban students of color in a suburban school.

*Response to Intervention*

This study demonstrated that an RTI literacy initiative, which followed the problem solving structure and which focused on progress-monitoring and interventions, increased teachers’ confidence in their ability to address the needs of struggling readers. However, it is important to emphasize that this initiative was accompanied by significant ongoing professional development and that the teachers were involved in the ongoing creation and refinement of the RTI model at their school. Therefore, any school or district which is instituting Response to Intervention should incorporate sustained high-quality professional development into its model.
This study demonstrated that teachers gained greater confidence in their ability to instruct the students in the Urban Partners program. However, there were mixed results regarding the teachers’ beliefs about the influences of various factors on the success of this population of students. Further, the teachers questioned whether RTI would be sufficient. Therefore, schools should investigate methods and strategies which will specifically address the needs of culturally diverse students and add these elements to their RTI models. These strategies could include: building stronger connections with parents, focusing on specific reading skills, and helping students of color connect with the curriculum. They should also include adjusting the curriculum to be more inclusive of the culture of these students. These strategies should be incorporated into each component of an RTI model.

**Professional Development**

Based on the results of this study, it appeared that the combination of the three professional development features under study (*content* which is based on research, *process* which includes reflection and dialogue, and *context* which is job-embedded) resulted in teachers’ belief that they gained significant knowledge about RTI during the course of the RTI initiative. It is clear that the professional development component of the initiative was critical to not only the teachers’ increased knowledge, but also the teachers’ implementation of the model and their perceptions of its positive impact on students.

This finding holds significant implications for practice and policy. It is advisable that schools provide teachers with ongoing professional development whenever a new initiative is put into place. At the beginning of this study, the teachers had only a limited
amount of confidence in their knowledge about RTI. At that point, they had attended one hour-long workshop about RTI, participated in one of the components of the school’s RTI model (the fall Class TAT), and been involved in discussions about RTI during some of their staff meetings. By the end of the initiative, after continued professional development, including a three-hour workshop which involved in-depth readings of and dialogue about professional journal articles, additional experiences with RTI components, another staff meeting which included readings and discussions of brief articles chosen to respond to questions which had arisen, and ongoing work to refine the school’s RTI model, the teachers reported far greater confidence in their knowledge about RTI.

Likewise, it is important that professional development programs include attention to content which is research-based, process which includes reflection and dialogue, and context which is job-embedded, regardless of the topic. These three features, which are recommended for professional learning communities, clearly had an impact on this initiative.

With respect to addressing the needs of students of color, schools should utilize similar professional development (with content based upon research, process which includes reflection and dialogue, and context which is job-embedded) to increase teachers’ knowledge about culturally responsive teaching. This topic was not specifically addressed in the school’s training about RTI and the teachers’ responses showed mixed results regarding their learning in this area. However, the teachers stated that they are interested in learning how to address the achievement gap. A similar model of professional development, using professional resources about this topic, has the potential to achieve similarly positive results.
According to Gay (2000), improving the achievement of students of color should receive high priority in a system’s training efforts. She further asserts that training should include information about culturally responsive teaching. Grossman & Ancess (2004) describe a collaborative action research project which demonstrates that a shared commitment to equity can identify and begin to dissolve barriers to high achievement for all. They maintain that the collaborative nature of this project created ownership and commitment which led to action; the teachers learned and practiced through their work together. Based upon the results of this case study, schools should embark on similar collaborative projects and could make progress within the context of an RTI initiative which includes a strong professional development component.

**Educating urban students of color in a suburban school**

Combining the results of this case study with the recommendations of the professional literature about culturally responsive teaching, it appears that Response to Intervention has the potential to address the learning needs of urban students of color, but only if practitioners incorporate the basic principles of culturally responsive teaching.

Viewed through this lens, an effective RTI model should place culture at the center of curriculum, instruction, and assessment in all its tiers: Tier 1 (general classroom instruction), Tier 2 (moderate intervention strategies), and Tier 3 (more intensive interventions). The school’s curriculum and instruction must match the cultural diversity of its students and incorporate the needs of linguistically diverse students. The school must *accommodate* the communication styles and literacy practices of its diverse students, *incorporate* and learn from the practices of its ethnic groups, and *adapt* by assisting parents in their efforts to help their children meet the school’s expectations. The
school should provide professional development so that the teachers will gain an understanding of culturally responsive teaching and have the knowledge to apply its attributes to the school’s RTI model. It is advisable that all of these efforts address teacher attitudes, expectations, and feelings of efficacy.

Schools need to extend their engagement of parents as partners in their child’s learning. Since teachers report that the lack of parental involvement and other factors outside of the school setting have a strong impact on struggling readers, schools should develop ways to help parents become more involved and understand the types of experiences their children need to become successful readers. Concurrently, schools must find ways to value and integrate the experiences of culturally diverse students into its curriculum and instruction.

It is recommended that schools provide teachers with information about culturally responsive teaching. Several teachers in the study voiced a desire to learn ways to better address the needs of the Urban Partners students. However, the results were mixed regarding the extent to which the teachers were convinced that cultural and linguistic factors are important. The RTI initiative and the professional development made progress in this area, but professional development which raises awareness about cultural and linguistic influences, and which addresses the particular needs of students of color, is necessary to truly address all the challenges of helping these students succeed.

According to Gay (2000), *culturally responsive teaching* is comprised of four key elements: teacher attitudes and expectations, cultural communication in the classroom, culturally diverse content in the curriculum, and culturally congruent instructional strategies. Viewed through the lens of culturally responsive teaching, a school’s
implementation of Response to Intervention should incorporate these four elements to be effective with students of color.

According to Aronson (2004) “If we are serious about closing achievement gaps, we will have to move beyond the simplistic rhetoric of ‘It’s the family,’ or ‘It’s the schools,’ or ‘It’s poverty’ – or ‘It’s stereotyping,’ for that matter. Serious analyses make it clear that all of these factors matter. Unless we learn to think complexly about the problem, then surely we will continue to fail our big test, which is to find a way for all children to thrive in school” (p. 18). The results of this study present optimism about the potential of Response to Intervention, but this increasingly popular model will truly address the achievement gap only if policymakers and educators “think complexly about the problem” and incorporate components which match the learning profiles of culturally diverse students.

**Implications/recommendations for further research**

As asserted by Klinger and Edwards (2006), when evaluating RTI instruction and interventions, “it is essential to find out what works with whom, by whom, and in what contexts” (p. 108). This study analyzed the impact of an RTI literacy initiative, which utilized the problem-solving approach, on teachers’ perceptions of efficacy with struggling readers. Further research could examine the impact such an approach to RTI can have on student literacy achievement, especially the achievement of culturally diverse students.

According to Geneva Gay (2000), “conventional paradigms and proposals for improving the achievement of students of color are doomed to failure” (p. 12). She
points to several high-profile innovations which appear to have a positive impact on the achievement of minority students, but questions their long-term effectiveness (p. 12).

Studies of the long-term results of innovations such as RTI could illuminate this dialogue and identify features which are effective as well as those which are not, in the long-term.

   Considerable discussion about the role of parents took place during this study. It would be advantageous to investigate the question: What are the most effective ways to engage parents who enroll their children in voluntary desegregation programs?

   Another compelling question is: What components of culturally responsive teaching would be effective in an RTI model? The results of this study revealed that teachers questioned whether the RTI model they were using was adequate. If a school or district adds components of culturally responsive teaching, will the teachers perceive increased levels of efficacy?

   Finally, are the features of professional development identified in this study adequate to create an effective professional development program for culturally responsive teaching? While the content, process, and context features in this study were identified as being effective with regards to the topic of RTI, it would be interesting to see if these components would be adequate with regards to the topic of culturally responsive teaching, or if additional components are identified as being necessary.

**Reflections on leadership**

   The participant-researcher, who was also the leader of this project, found ample opportunities to reflect upon her leadership throughout the course of this study. Three
categories of leadership (ethical, transformational, and distributed) provide an illuminating framework for these reflections.

Within the category of ethical leadership, the participant-researcher found inspiration in the book, *Ethical Leadership* (Starratt 2004), specifically in relation to the virtues of responsibility, authenticity, and presence. Starratt presents the business of learning as profoundly moral work rather than simply an intellectual endeavor and urges readers to move beyond technical efficiency to an understanding of educational leadership as a moral activity. During the course of this study, the participant-researcher kept asking questions about the impact of the RTI initiative on the Urban Partners students, almost to the point of exasperating the study participants, most of whom responded that the initiative was helping all struggling learners in the same way and did not identify any differences, with respect to the RTI initiative itself, between the general population of students and the Urban Partners students. Gradually, however, as the study progressed, the teachers began to discuss their thoughts about differences between the two populations of students, leading to some shifts in the relative amount of influence afforded to school-based factors and home-based factors. These thoughts then led to requests to learn more about effective strategies to address the needs of the Urban Partners students. Reflecting upon this process, the researcher recognizes the value of viewing educational leadership as a moral activity, thereby finding the courage to act on her beliefs. The researcher intends to continue to reflect and act within the context of the virtues of responsibility, authenticity, and presence as she takes the next steps in this project: leading professional development about culturally responsive teaching.
Within the category of transformational leadership, the participant-researcher was influenced by the book, *Leadership without easy answers* (Heifetz, 1994), specifically with regards to the differentiation between technical and adaptive challenges. Throughout this project, the researcher reminded herself that the issues of achievement for urban students of color are adaptive, not technical, challenges. She incorporated this idea by asking probing questions to examine teachers’ assumptions about the achievement of Urban Partners students. Changing these assumptions, an adaptive challenge, will be critical to improving the achievement of this population of students. During the RTI initiative, the researcher experienced the value of sustained reading, reflection, dialogue, and action with respect to RTI. She knows that it will be necessary to conduct the same type of sustained professional development in order to make the adaptive change in teachers’ assumptions and to address the adaptive challenge of incorporating culturally responsive teaching into the school’s curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

The theories of distributed leadership focus on collaboration and commitment on the part of many leaders. For example, Fullan (2005) encourages capacity building in order to sustain change even if the leadership changes. During this study, the participant-researcher was also the project leader. However, she witnessed several teachers assume leadership roles. Some of the teachers became leaders by researching various models of RTI, sharing them with the staff, and applying them to the school’s RTI model. Other teachers became leaders by voicing their thoughts about educating the students in the Urban Partners program, gradually becoming more courageous in identifying the complex nature of this issue. The participant-researcher encouraged both types of
leadership, recognizing that capacity building takes time and requires ownership. She intends to continue to encourage many staff members to be learners and leaders during the ongoing revision of the school’s RTI model and as she leads professional development about culturally responsive teaching.

Through this study, the participant-researcher also experienced the value of frequently asking teachers for feedback regarding the RTI initiative. This process required the teachers to frequently reflect upon the progress of the initiative and required the researcher (as project leader) to frequently reflect upon the teachers’ feedback. Both types of reflection resulted in positive changes throughout the initiative, which continued after the study ended. For example, during the initiative, the teachers regularly recommended that literacy blocks would be advantageous. At the end of the school year, the researcher (as project leader) gave the teachers the challenge of adjusting the entire specialists’ schedule in order to create literacy blocks at each grade-level. A discussion ensued about what the staff valued regarding the schedule: the convenience of staff members or the literacy learning of the students. The staff agreed that they valued the literacy learning of the students. A representative group of teachers tackled the difficult task of adjusting the entire schedule to create the literacy blocks, which were successfully implemented the following year. Because the researcher frequently asked for feedback, she was able to gauge the strength of the teachers’ beliefs about the advantage of literacy blocks and was able to capitalize on these beliefs.

Finally, the participant-researcher learned the importance of incorporating culture into all aspects of educational endeavors. Her next steps as leader of the RTI initiative at her school will focus on incorporating culturally responsive teaching into professional
development and into the RTI model. She intends to share professional articles with all staff and to lead a study group about culturally responsive teaching with interested staff members. Likewise, she will look for opportunities to examine other aspects of curriculum and instruction through the lens of culture, in order to increase the teachers’ efficacy with culturally diverse students. In the future, she will accompany any new initiatives with a focus on culturally responsive teaching and share these perspectives with other educational leaders in her district.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study focused on a Response to Intervention (RTI) literacy initiative in a suburban elementary school near a large urban area in New England. The initiative included professional development about RTI and implementation of components of an RTI model. The professional development incorporated three features which are recommended for professional learning communities: content which is research-based, process which includes reflection and dialogue, and context which is job-embedded. The RTI model utilized the “problem-solving” approach, and included progress-monitoring and interventions. The participant-researcher analyzed teachers’ feedback regarding the professional development and the RTI model, as the initiative developed, with a specific focus on the teachers’ perceptions about the impact of the initiative on the school’s capacity to effectively instruct urban students of color who were participants in a voluntary desegregation program.

Teachers identified all three features of the professional development as being beneficial to their understanding about and implementation of Response to Intervention.
Further, they indicated that the RTI initiative increased their confidence in the school’s capacity to address the needs of all struggling readers, including those who were participants in the voluntary desegregation program.

The findings from the study indicated that the *combination* of three elements (sustained professional development about RTI, implementation of RTI in the school setting, and conversations and questions about addressing the needs of urban students of color) resulted in increased teacher confidence in their ability to provide effective instruction to this population of students. Further, the *interaction* of these three elements resulted in identification of next steps which will specifically address their needs: literacy blocks, an RTI tool-kit as a resource for teachers and parents, stronger home-school partnership, and increased teacher knowledge about working with urban students of color. However, several teachers questioned whether RTI alone was adequate to address the complex issues of students of color in a voluntary desegregation program. They recognized that they needed more information about effective instructional strategies to match the learning profiles of this population of students.

Combining the results of this case study with the recommendations of the professional literature about culturally responsive teaching, it appears that Response to Intervention has the potential to address the learning needs of urban students of color, but only if practitioners incorporate some basic principles of culturally responsive teaching. According to Gay (2000), *culturally responsive teaching* is comprised of four key elements: teacher attitudes and expectations, cultural communication in the classroom, culturally diverse content in the curriculum, and culturally congruent instructional strategies. Viewed through the lens of culturally responsive teaching, a school’s
implementation of Response to Intervention should incorporate these four elements to be effective with students of color.

As Response to Intervention becomes more prevalent in our schools, it will be essential that districts provide sustained professional development (with content based upon research, process which includes reflection and dialogue, and context which is job-embedded) for teachers. In addition, schools should utilize similar professional development to increase teachers’ knowledge about culturally responsive teaching. Policymakers and educators should incorporate culturally responsive teaching into their RTI models in order to increase the likelihood that RTI will be effective in addressing the achievement gap.
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APPENDIX B: Curriculum Day Feedback

February 13, 2008

As participants in the RTI study, I would like to elicit your feedback regarding the recent (February 1) Curriculum Day, which focused on RTI. To refresh your memories about the agenda for the day, I’m attaching copies of the handouts.

Please remember that I’m seriously looking for your honest opinions, for the purposes of this study, as well as for the improvement of our RTI efforts at Beech School.

1. Which parts of the Curriculum Day were most helpful to you in learning about RTI?
   (Circle all which were helpful.)
   a. Review and discussion of legal issues
   b. Reading the three different articles about RTI
   c. Using the “Discussion Protocol” to discuss the articles with colleagues at other grade-levels
   d. Updating the draft of our RTI model (Class TATs, progress monitoring)

   Comments:

2. Which parts of the day will help us address the needs of our struggling readers?
   (Circle all which were helpful.)
   a. Review and discussion of legal issues
   b. Reading the three different articles about RTI
   c. Using the “Discussion Protocol” to discuss the articles with colleagues at other grade-levels
   d. Updating the draft of our RTI model (Class TATs, progress monitoring)

   Comments:

3. Which parts of the day will help us address the needs of our struggling readers who are Urban Partners students?
   (Circle all which were helpful.)
   a. Review and discussion of legal issues
   b. Reading the three different articles about RTI
   c. Using the “Discussion Protocol” to discuss the articles with colleagues at other grade-levels
   d. Updating the draft of our RTI model (Class TATs, progress monitoring)

   Comments:

4. What additional comments do you have about the Curriculum Day?

Thanks again for your valuable honest feedback!
APPENDIX C

Response to Intervention Study

Focus Group Questions: March 17, 2008

1. Under the heading of Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment, our 2007-08 School Improvement Plan lists the following action steps:
   - Pilot “Response to Intervention” model, as part of the system-wide initiative in Kindergarten
   - Apply “Response to Intervention” structures to Grades 1 – 4
   - Connect Language Arts assessments to “Response to Intervention”
   - Use DIBELS phonics assessment in Kindergarten (Fall, Winter, Spring)

   We’re working on these action steps though our RTI initiative, which includes Class TATs, assessments (progress-monitoring), in-class interventions, and RTI intervention groups. Our focus, this year, is on literacy. Please answer the following questions, in relation to how they apply to your grade-level:
   a. In what ways is our RTI initiative helping us address the needs of our struggling readers who are Urban Partners students?

   b. In what ways is our RTI initiative not doing enough to address the needs of our struggling readers who are Urban Partners students?

   c. What elements should we add to our RTI model to better address the needs of these students?

2. Under the heading of Human Resource Development, our 2007-08 School Improvement Plan lists these action steps:
   - Conduct “Response to Intervention” study groups
   - Incorporate cross-grade-level meetings into more staff meetings

   We’re working on these action steps through various Professional Development activities about RTI this year. Through study groups, presentations, and discussions during staff meetings and Curriculum Days, we’ve learned about RTI. In addition, Kindergarten teachers have had workshops and meetings about the DIBELS assessment and related interventions.
   a. How have these Professional Development activities helped you understand and implement the RTI approach?

   b. How have these Professional Development activities helped you instruct our struggling readers who are Urban Partners students?
There are many different types of professional development. Teachers take courses, attend conferences, consult professional journals, attend workshops, etc. In some instances, all the teachers in a school read articles, reflect upon the ideas in the articles, and discuss them with colleagues. Please provide feedback regarding your beliefs about the value of this type of professional development by circling the appropriate response.

1. How valuable is it to read articles during staff meetings?
   no value  minimal value  some value  significant value

2. How valuable is it to discuss articles during staff meetings?
   no value  minimal value  some value  significant value

3. How valuable is it to discuss articles with grade-level colleagues (or with those whose jobs are similar to yours), as we did during the April 7 staff meeting?
   no value  minimal value  some value  significant value

4. How valuable is it to discuss articles in cross-grade-level groups (and with colleagues whose jobs are different from yours) as we did during the February 1 Curriculum Day?
   no value  minimal value  some value  significant value

5. How valuable is it that all professional staff members are involved in these discussions (rather than having only a small number of staff members focusing on this topic)?
   no value  minimal value  some value  significant value

6. How valuable is it to have reading, reflection, and dialogue as part of your professional development?
   no value  minimal value  some value  significant value

7. Please comment on any of the above questions.
APPENDIX E

Feedback from Spring Class TATs

April 6, 2008

Dear Participants in the Study of our RTI Initiative,

During the next two weeks, you will all participate in a Class TAT, the purpose of which is to get a snapshot of the students in your class and determine if there are additional intervention steps which need to be taken to help any particular students. The spring Class TAT is a component of the “progress monitoring” in our RTI model. After your Class TAT, I would appreciate your thoughtful responses to the following questions:

1. Did the spring Class TAT help you to address the needs of struggling readers in your class? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

2. Did the spring Class TAT help you to address any particular needs of struggling readers who are Urban Partners students? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

3. Are there specific intervention strategies (to be accomplished by you, by an aide, by a specialist, etc.), identified during the spring Class TAT, which will help you instruct struggling readers? If yes, what are they? If no, in which components of literacy instruction do you need additional intervention strategies?

4. What additional feedback would you like to give about the spring Class TATs?

5. What additional feedback would you like to give about the Class TATs (fall and spring) in general?
APPENDIX F

Response to Intervention Study
Interview Questions: April 30, 2008

1. The National Staff Development Council has developed standards for professional development organized in three categories: content, process and context. Two prominent experts on Professional Learning Communities (Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker) have written that, in a professional learning community:
   • the content of a staff development program is based on research,
   • the process of staff development includes reflection and dialogue,
   • the context of staff development is job-embedded.

   To what extent do you believe these elements of our Professional Development about the RTI initiative have helped you with your understanding of RTI?

2. In what ways is our RTI initiative helping teachers to address the needs of our struggling readers?

3. What else do we need to do to address these needs?

4. In what ways is our RTI initiative helping teachers to address the needs of our struggling readers who are Urban Partners students?

5. What else do we need to do to address these needs?

6. How have our Professional Development activities helped you instruct our struggling readers who are Urban Partners students?