# AGENTS OF CHANGE: VOICES OF TEACHERS ON RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION

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**Abstract**

What are teachers' perceptions of Response to Intervention (RTI)? To address this question, we conducted interviews about teacher perceptions of an RTI model during the second year of its implementation at an urban elementary school. Results of this qualitative study suggest that teachers' perceptions of the RTI model grew more positive during the second year, compared to the first year of the model's implementation. Teachers told interviewers that the RTI model improved the special education referral process, progress monitoring, and collaborative planning structures in their school. Implications for practice are presented.

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> *"I feel like I am an agent of change but I also feel like my students are agents of change. You know, I think kids are as invested as the teachers.*- Sharlene, second grade teacher

Response to Intervention (RTI) models are one of the most common initiatives being implemented today to address concerns about all U.S. students having equitable access to general education, including students with disabilities, students from diverse cultural backgrounds, and students who speak English as a second language. Although not mandated by federal regulation, RTI approaches are included in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) regulations (Sec. 300.307), which suggests a systematic process for screening, intervening and monitoring to determine a child's response to scientific, research-based intervention. IDEA and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) both support closing achievement gaps, underscoring importance of high quality, scientifically-based instruction and interventions, and holding schools accountable for the progress of all students in meeting grade level standards (Klotz, 2007). A number of leading national organizations and coalition groups, including the National Research Center on Learning Disabilities and the 14 organizations forming the 2004 Learning Disabilities (LD) Roundtable coalition, have outlined the core features of an RTI process as follows:

1. High quality, research-based instruction and behavioral support in general education.
2. Universal (school-wide or district-wide) screening of academics and behavior in order to determine which students need closer monitoring or additional interventions.
3. Multiple Tiers of increasingly intense scientific, research-based interventions that are matched to student need.
4. Use of a collaborative approach by school staff for development, implementation, and monitoring of the intervention process.
5. Continuous monitoring of student progress during the interventions, using objective information to determine if students are meeting goals.
6. Follow-up measures providing information that the intervention was implemented as intended and with appropriate consistency.
7. Documentation of parent involvement throughout the process.
8. Documentation that the special education evaluation timelines specified in IDEA 2004 and in the state regulations is followed unless both the parents and the school team agree to an extension.

These core features may be grouped under three essential aims of a RTI approach:(1) the provision of scientific, research-based instruction and interventions in general education; (2) monitoring and measurement of student progress in response to the instruction and interventions; and (3) use of these measures of student progress to shape

instruction and make educational decisions (Klotz, 2007). Regardless of the RTI approach or model used, schools must be prepared to offer a variety of proven instructional strategies; staff must be trained to measure student performance using methods that are sensitive to small increments of growth; and parents must be kept informed of these new procedures and made partners in the process (Klotz, 2007). Teams must also determine how they will define an "adequate" response to an intervention -- in other words, *how much progress over what period of time will be the benchmark to determine if an intervention is successful?* Until forthcoming federal regulations offer guidance, each school district must develop its own procedures based on state regulations, available resources, and the needs of its student population.

RTI is commonly implemented using one of two approaches. The "problem solving" approach uses interventions, selected by a team, that target each student's individual needs. The "standard treatment" approach uses one consistent intervention, selected by the school that addresses multiple students' needs. Both approaches use universal screening for all students and Tiers of support. Typical Tiers (Fuchs, Fuchs, 2006; Klingner & Edwards, 2006) are:

- (Tier 1) primary prevention for all students, known as core instruction
- (Tier 2) secondary prevention that provides more targeted intervention for struggling students, and
- (Tier 3) tertiary prevention that includes intensive, individualized interventions for students in need of more concentrated support

The top-down reform approaches of NCLB and IDEA have been debated (i.e., Apple, 2006; Berliner, 2002; Cochran-Smith, 2006; Harry & Klingner, 2007), as centralized change strategies are often considered ineffective. While RTI allows some decentralization -- as educators can exercise professional judgment within a top-down reform effort -- one perspective suggests that educators "are no longer the drivers of reform, but the driven" (Shirley & Hargreaves, 2006, p. 2). Further, while educators may play active roles in reform efforts, their perspectives are seldom presented and sparingly considered in the research literature (Darling-Hammond, 2009). Therefore, we were interested in developing a mechanism for educators to share their perspectives on developing and implementing an RTI model.

## Methodology

### School Description

Garden Elementary School (a pseudonym) is located in a large urban neighborhood and serves as a resource hub for the neighborhood community. Of the 332 students enrolled, 195 (59%) identify as Latino, 52 (16%) identify as African-American, 44 (13%) identify as Asian, 37 (11%) identify as White, and four (1%) identify as other. Fifty-four students (16%) receive special education services and 129 (39%) students are identified as having Limited English Proficiency skills by the district.

As part of a public school district, Garden Elementary School is accountable to the same state exams as the regular public schools and is held to high standards of

performance through a five-year quality review process. However, as a pilot school, it has control over budgeting, staffing, curriculum, and scheduling.

As a community school, Garden Elementary School's educators recognize that many factors influence education. Therefore, they mobilized assets within their school as well as within their community in order to provide extended services, including:

- an adult basic education program with English as a Second Language instruction;
- a state-licensed community health clinic and, periodically, a free dental clinic;
- before- and after-school programs with tutoring, enrichment, and homework support;
- supplemental tutoring to academically at-risk students in grades two through five;
- a "Sports for Kids" coordinator who organizes structured activities during recess, class time, and afterschool;
- counseling and mentoring services offered by one a full-time social worker, with help from other social workers, volunteer mentors, and therapists from community agencies;
- a weekly enrichment program that brings professional art, music, dance, and physical education providers to school each Friday; and
- a five-week summer enrichment program offering literacy and math instruction, and enrichment in science, social studies, physical education, and the arts.

**Participants**

Of the 26 educators at the school, 24 were female; two were male; 20 self-identified as White; four self-identified as African-American; two self-identified as Latina; one self-identified as Asian. Twenty-four teachers held general education teaching licenses, nine of the 26 held additional special education licenses, two were also licensed as early childhood teachers and two held literacy specialist licenses. Fifteen teachers were deemed "highly qualified" to teach ELLs. On average, teachers at Garden Elementary had 6.8 years of teaching experience, averaging 5.6 years at Garden Elementary.

We wanted to gain a comprehensive and long-term view of the educators' perceptions of a school reform effort; therefore we asked educators to volunteer to participate in a year of focus groups and individual interviews. Eight teachers agreed to participant; all were female. Four self-identified as Anglo, two self-identified as Latina, one self-identified as African-American, and one self-identified as Asian-American. Specifically, the self-selected sample was comprised of four general education classroom teachers, one school reading specialist, and three special education teachers. One special educator worked in a separate classroom, while the others were resource room teachers assigned to individual grade levels. Six of the eight participants were also endorsed in supporting sheltered-English instruction[1] (SEI). The eight teachers who participated in

[1] Sheltered English instruction refers to an instructional approach used to make academic instruction in English comprehensible to limited English proficient students (LEP) (Freeman and Freeman, 1988).

our focus groups and individual interviews averaged 6.2 years teaching and 4.8 years teaching at Garden Elementary. Refer to Table 2 for demographics.

**Professional Development Procedure**

We initiated a school-university partnership during the 2007-2008 academic year (Rinaldi & Stuart, 2009; Stuart & Rinaldi, 2009), to support teachers in developing an RTI model. At that time, teachers shared concerns about sufficient time for planning and for responsibility division in the areas of instruction at various Tiers, assessment, and tracking effectiveness of interventions. In short, they cautioned against jumping into a "one size fits all" plan. They wanted to develop a model to respond to the specific needs of their community (Rinaldi & Stuart, 2009; Stuart & Rinaldi, 2009). This collaboration resulted in a school-wide RTI model for reading that contained:

- universal screening in the fall;
- identification of students' reading needs into three Tiers
- continuous progress monitoring following guidelines proposed by Fuchs and Fuchs (2003);
- a progressive strategy for implementing core instruction for Tier 1, small-group instruction for Tier 2, and one-to-one intervention for Tier 3; and
- careful tracking of special education referrals.

**Year 1.** As part of the RTI process implemented in Year 1 (see Table 1), we presented all educators in the building with a multidimensional collaborative planning model (Stuart & Rinaldi, 2009) to guide their assessment process planning. The collaborative planning model was designed help participants, in grade level teams of at least one general and one special educator, to link the process of using assessment results to develop Individual Education Plan (IEP) goals. This collaborative planning model allowed participants to develop and present case studies from their own classroom using culturally and linguistically responsive instructional planning. We integrated various informal assessment practices identified by participants -- including task analysis, dynamic assessment, error analysis, and meta-cognitive training -- to help them plan and monitor progress over time.

**Year 2.** As part of the second year of implementation of RTI in reading, the principal's commitment continued to provide school structures that supported RTI, which included:

- weekly planning time at the individual, grade, and school-wide level,
- personnel to support the literacy period in universal screening,
- progress monitoring
- instructional support,
- an innovative schedule that guaranteed at least two staff members to be available for each grade level,
- support for professional learning community activities and a new collaborative administration and teacher-led team that planned weekly professional development

sessions to provide training in scientifically-based instructional strategies in reading (citation deleted for blinded review).

From the existing partnership, we facilitated three one and a half hour sessions of professional development at the school over the course of the academic year. Topics included RTI description and implementation, data analysis presentation of curriculum-based measures (i.e., oral reading fluency), instruction and preventative problem-solving for students who do not make progress in the reading curriculum, and federally-recommended literacy strategies (National Reading Panel, 2000).

We also regularly attended grade level data meetings where the fidelity of core instruction was discussed, as well as the evaluation of small group strategy instruction (Tier 2) and one-to-one (Tier 3) interventions using progress monitoring data to inform the decision-making processes of the teachers in grade-level teams. The teachers were provided with typical individual planning time, plus an additional hour of grade level problem-solving planning time where the needs of students receiving Tier 2 and Tier 3 were reviewed on a 4-6 week rotation. In addition, special education teachers and ancillary staff working with students receiving Tier 3 interventions meet weekly to monitor progress and share evidence of student work during the weekly grade-level team meetings. Detailed protocol reviewing core instruction, strategic instruction and interventions were used to meet the 4-6 week rotation cycle recommended by RTI structures described by Fuchs and Fuchs (2003) and presented in Stuart & Rinaldi, 2009.

## Data Collection

We collected data for this study over a twelve-month period, through two 90-minute focus groups and follow-up individual interviews. The focus groups helped to build rapport with the eight participants, and helped to establish topics pertinent to participants regarding RTI. The first focus group was held in the fall, the second focus group was held in the spring. The third author led the focus groups with two graduate assistants, trained in qualitative research. Focus groups and individual interviews were video- taped and audio transcribed. Following the initial analysis of focus group data, we developed a follow-up protocol to use with individual interviews. See Appendix A for Focus group and individual interview prompts.

Each participant was interviewed individually, approximately two to three weeks after each focus group session. These interviews also lasted 90 minutes and were conducted by each of the authors. We determined the format of the individual interviews by the participants' responses to initial questions. If a participant covered the content of the individual interview protocol, we asked only clarifying or expansion questions. Our goal was to allow the participants to shape the interviews. We used a second protocol to ensure that interviews covered the same basic format, to prompt participation, or to guide conversation back to the topic of RTI. We audio-taped and transcribed these interviews, as well. Two to four weeks after each individual interview, each participant completed a written questionnaire based on important themes from both the focus groups and individual interviews.

Throughout the length of this study, we also kept extensive field notes to aid reflection upon the context and meaning of each interview. These notes contained

specific descriptions of the participants, their actions, the interview sites, and the researcher and subject conversations. We used these notes to elaborate upon researcher stance, prejudices, intuitions, problems, ideas and impressions. Reviewing these notes helped us focus on new questions to ask during follow-up interviews. They also pointed toward themes emerging from the data. In addition, we maintained a research journal in a strictly chronological format. It included methodological, logistical, and miscellaneous notes that we continually updated throughout the data collection period.

## Data Analysis

We analyzed data using four overlapping stages of the constant comparative (Glasner & Strauss, 1967) method. The process of data analysis is recursive; therefore, we examined data from the sources described in the data collection section throughout this study. In stage one, focus group data was coded into as many analysis categories as possible. After conducting focus groups, we used emergent themes to formulate questions for individual interviews. Once all the data were collected, interview transcripts, questionnaires, observation notes, and field notes were re-read. Themes were once again generated and coded. We used a reconciliation method to reach consensus on the coded text. When a disagreement related to a coding category occurred, we used the majority code.

During the second stage, we sorted and reorganized data inductively and deductively by chunking and clustering it into similar categories and then reorganizing to identify any connections between or among categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the third stage, many of the themes were refined and combined, which gradually led to the development of a theory. In the final stage of data analysis, overarching themes emerged. The use of constant comparison (via the grounded theory of Glasner & Strauss, 1967, and Strauss & Corbin, 1990) helped us derive specific themes from the interview transcripts, questionnaire feedback, and observation notes. In addition, one of the authors met with each participant to review interview transcripts, overarching theme results, and to answer questions or address concerns. Participants reviewed results and gave clarification where appropriate. We made necessary revisions to the interview transcripts and demographic information based on participant feedback.

## Results and Discussion

As data collection continued, it became evident that educators' perceptions of RTI shifted between the first and second year of using the model. , participants discussed feelings of the RTI model being an administrative directive (Rinaldi & Stuart, 2009; Stuart & Rinaldi, 2009), data from this study indicate that participants had clearer goals for themselves as educators as well as an increase in the ways in which they could collaborate to develop and deliver instruction.

Of note were participants' perceptions in their abilities to hold higher academic expectations for students. Further, participants' perceptions of themselves and their planning abilities contributed greatly to their views on student achievement. Participants also discussed a wide variety of factors that resulted from implementing the RTI model; however, an overarching theme was the shift in school culture. The following section

discusses these results and compares year 1 data as reported in Rinaldi and Stuart (2009) with data from this study.

**Satisfaction with the Special Education Referral Process**

Participants were particularly interested in discussing the special education referral rate in their interviews about RTI. Two years prior to the implementation of RTI in this school, the initial referral rate for that year was one of the highest in the district, reaching 10% of the student population.

A detailed look back at referral process satisfaction during the first year of this model's implementation showed that about half of the teachers in this building were not satisfied with various aspects of how colleagues collaborate during the referral process. At that time, one special educator commented, "I am unhappy about both the referral process and what happens once students receive special education services. Many of teachers are on very different pages than the special education department. If we can't collaborate the results are disastrous."

After a year of the RTI model implementation, however the initial referral to special education at the school that year dropped by fifty percent and in the next year another 50%, reducing the initial referral rates from 10% to 3% since the implementation of the model. Authors verified these rates with district data. These percentages were frequently discussed as a positive outcome of RTI by participants.

> I think that the fact that we haven't had referrals speaks for it right there yet (mid school year- year 2 of RTI implementation). Last year we had 22 referrals; this year we've had only three. That's huge. There's two pieces: We aren't referring as much and students who might have been referred at an earlier point a few years ago are getting the services they need.
>
> - Kayla, Special Educator

> I actually taught in the special education classroom in my old school. There was minimal data collection and so many students in the special education classroom; I just don't think they needed to be there. The referral process was too easy and too quick and in many cases the only option for teachers when a student was having difficulties. RTI really allows you more time to give the students time to respond to different types of intervention and instruction while also monitoring their progress.
>
> -Susan, Special Educator

Participants indicated that the RTI model was effective because they were given time to problem-solve issues surrounding the implementation of instructional interventions while having a framework to use data to inform instruction. Specifically, participants felt that they were highly effective in reporting academic progress to their peers in measurable ways through graphs and student work samples. They also appreciated receiving direct assistance from peers to problem-solve various effective instructional delivery practices.

Our results show that participants perceived that students' needs were being identified and served more efficiently with the RTI model than before the model's implementation. This relates to Vaughn & Fuchs (2003) work which cites that the benefits of RTI include identification of students using an at-risk rather than deficit model, early identification of and intervention for students, specifically, for those with learning disabilities, and reduction of identification bias, and a strong focus on student outcomes (Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). These factors improve a school's ability to identify students with disabilities and to target Tier 3 resources more efficiently (Jenkins & O'Connor, 2001; Johnson, Mellard, Fuchs, & McKnight, 2006; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

**Enhanced Efficacy of Progress Monitoring**

Results also showed that participants felt that they made a shift in the manner in which they used data to inform instruction. During year one, participants seemed concerned about how data should be collected, what data should be collected, and who would collect data. At that time, participants expressed satisfaction with the term "progress monitoring," but they also expressed concerns about the time required to monitor student progress by collecting data. One participant shared, "Data collection is usually limited to anecdotal records and it is hard to manage gathering data in other forms without support." Several participants, during first year interviews, expressed concern with balancing the collection of assessment data with handling other instructional responsibilities. The concerns that participants discussed during year 1 align with Stecker, Lembke, and Foegen (2008) who assert that progress monitoring within RTI must: "(a) be sensitive to student change, (b) be educationally meaningful, and (c) not monopolize instructional time" while providing comprehensive structure of decision for instructional planning (p. 49).

Participants also indicated that prior to the implementation of the model, many students receiving special education services were not receiving targeted instruction based on individual needs and that progress monitoring practices varied among teachers. However, during year 2, after the implementation of the RTI model, participants agreed that the progress monitoring embedded in the model did not monopolize instructional time and helped them to identify students who needed more academic support. Further, in year 2, participants discussed suggestions for how to intervene when students did not progress at the Tier 2 and Tier 3 levels. For example, in school-wide professional development meetings they presented and modeled a variety of interventions related to the five areas of literacy. Their hope was to be able to build on their in-house expertise and do cross-training of assessments and effective interventions. Before the model's implementation, participants shared limited suggestions when Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions were not effective. The RTI model created a data-informed synergy among the participants that helped them maximize existing general education structures and resources to better serve the needs of diverse learners, including those with special education needs.

> Like the student I was talking about, through RTI, we've had several adults working with him on intensive instruction and it's really given us an indication that he may need to be referred for special education. In terms

> of other students, we used to have readers who have no performance results, either with fluency or comprehension, now we take what we learn from assessment and then design an individual intervention. RTI helps us look at what students need and it helps us know if we are giving it to them because we can track progress. Teachers are aware that their students' progress is being monitored.
>
> -Keisha, Reading Specialist

Teachers' perceptions about the necessity of progress monitoring support previous findings by Linan-Thompson, Cirino, Vaughn (2007) who reported the effectiveness of progress monitoring in addressing the needs of ELLs. As one educator shared,

> We now have very concrete data to go into pre-referral meetings. We have this concrete data, regardless of whether they are ELL or monolingual we have data to show whether services are needed. Obviously, language is a factor- if their language is lower, do we expect them to make the same progress as a mono? No. What RTI allows us to do is monitor progress. If a student makes no progress – at their own individual level – then maybe a special education referral is needed.
>
> - Luisa, special education and ELL teacher
>
> -

A significant concern prior to the implementation of the RTI model was that students who received special education services often missed instruction in core curricular areas as they were pulled out of general education classrooms during these instructional times (Rinaldi & Stuart, 2009). In many situations, these students would fall further behind their peers as the year progressed, even with increased special education support. During the first year of the model's implementation, this concern was addressed as teachers negotiated and evaluated curriculum standards by grade level and established school-wide grade level core instructional guides. In addition, they developed progress-monitoring structures that allowed them to follow the progress of all students including special education students in the model. During year 2, they integrated these progress-monitoring structures into practice. One general education teacher stated, "RTI has been instrumental in getting to analyze and address our core instruction so that all of us are on the same page".

**Collaborative Planning Structures**

According to participants, teachers' initial feelings about implementing an RTI model were "optimistic but mixed". In fact, participants during the first year reported the culture of school as "optimistically frustrated" (Rinaldi & Stuart, 2009). Information gathered from the second year, however, indicate that participants perceived themselves as the primary stakeholders in this RTI reform and tend to perceive the RTI model as an opportunity to increase collaboration.

Data taken at the time that educators were first provided with professional development on RTI (before the model was implemented at the school) showed that participants had concerns centering on how to collaborate (Rinaldi & Stuart, 2009):

> There's a frustration from teachers being accountable for performing interventions that it was assumed all teachers knew how to do. There's no time built in for communication between interns, parapros, and classroom teachers.

During the second year of the model's implementation, however, participants were significantly more positive about collaboration practices.

"This year, there's been more collaboration among teachers and specialists. Overall, the atmosphere in the building seems more geared toward the children and what they need," said one participant. Another shared:

> Last year it was a little bit confusing, there was some buy-in, I think because some people saw immediate results. Not everyone saw results, though, and that frustrated some people. The other thing is, teachers weren't used to talking about kids as often with that level of specification. But now, teachers now are talking more about specifics and are more comfortable with specifics- even when not everything is going great. The level of discussion and depth of discussion wasn't there last year – but now we have a common language.
>
> -Sasha, second grade teacher

The RTI model (Stuart & Rinaldi, 2009) used a collaborative instructional planning and intervention framework that integrates planning, reflection, problem-solving, and progress monitoring as a team from various disciplines (e.g., general educator, English for Speakers of Other languages (ESL) educator, special educator). Providing educators with long-term support in the form of professional development opportunities is essential, as it enables them to develop a "common language" and allows them to reflect and problem solve in collaborative groups (Fletcher & Vaughn 2009).

The RTI model in place at this school also supported implementation of school-wide collaborative planning structures to address the needs of educators who serve students identified as academically at-risk and ELLs with academic difficulties. This requires that schools adopt professional development and coaching opportunities in order for educators trained in various specializations to share skills. When districts are able to provide time for incorporating collaborative planning structures, schools are able address academic difficulties regardless of with whom or where individual students receive services.

**Educators as change agents**. We were also provided with a contextual picture of participants' perceptions. Garden Elementary is a pilot school with control over budgeting, staffing, curriculum, and scheduling. The school also provides comprehensive educational, health, social, family, and economic supports. Before implementation of the RTI model, we listened to participants' views on how to address Garden Elementary

community members' needs. At that time, participants were supportive about developing a RTI model, but cautioned against jumping into a "one size fits all" plan. They wanted to develop a model to respond to the specific needs of their community. As data collection continued and expanded, it became clear that not only were participants describing a shift in school culture, they were also specifically describing a shift in their views of themselves as educational leaders. Angie, a general educator, shared,

> I think the fact that everyone feels that they have the freedom to do what's best for kids is so important. You know, I feel empowered; I feel that I can do this and can talk about that, but I don't feel that I have to do what my principal tells me to do. No one here feels that way.

The RTI model afforded participants a greater sense of autonomy and personal efficacy as educators. One important indicator of how teachers perceive their empowerment to influence positive learning outcomes is "teacher efficacy" (Nunn & Jantz, 2009). Simply, this concept refers to the belief that the teacher is effective in controlling positive outcomes of learning and behavior as a result of her or his actions (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy & Hoy, 1998). Participants during the second year of data collection indicated that they felt more in control of way in which the RTI model was implemented:

> I think last year it was still seen as a top down model. We weren't really clear on where it was coming from or why we were doing it. It felt top heavy – in terms of we have to do this and give this to "C", and do these things from this outside entity. But now that we've aligned a lot of our professional development to different elements of reading interventions, I think for teachers all the pieces are coming together.
>
> - Tracy, first grade and ELL teacher

> I think it affects me with my planning and preparation each month, I don't just assess at the beginning and the end of the year. RTI helps me pay close attention to each student and I feel confident that I know what level each of my students are at." Kayla, a special educator, shared, "It's smoother this year, and it's more the norm. I've started to do goal setting with students and being really transparent about 'this is where you are and where you need to go' – so now my kids are motivated! I feel like I am a change agent but I also feel like my students are agents of change. You know, I think kids are as invested as the teachers."
>
> -Sharlene, second grade teacher

These perceptions echo findings by Nielsen, Barry, & Stabb (2008) who reported that teachers who engage in collaborative efforts are more likely to see themselves as change agents within their buildings. In fact, teachers in this school engaged in the collaborative planning of professional development themes and approaches for delivery as equal partners with the administration. The result was teachers becoming change agents – not only of their students' learning – but of their own professional development,

teaching and learning. The collaboration among the administration and faculty at Garden Elementary School allowed for this type of best practice approach to the implementation and its transition from top-down to actual adoption.

## Study Limitations

Although qualitative research does not depend on a particular sample size as the basis for generalization (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984), implications of participant self-selection bear mentioning. The strategy of selecting participants in this study rested on the multiple purposes of illuminating, interpretation, and understanding (Glesne & Pleskin, 1992). Because we were interested in in-depth understanding of individual perceptions of RTI at a particular setting, we traded "breadth for depth" (Glesne & Pleskin, 1992, p. 27) by spending extended time with limited participants. Although we collected a large volume of interview transcripts (104 pages, single-spaced) and demographic information, this collection only allowed a glimpse into participants' perceptions of the RTI model implemented in their school. While these educators do not represent all educators, their opinions are valid and lend a voice to many involved with change related to RTI.

## Implications for Practice

The investigation further supports the needs educators have as the United States school population evolves. Educators want to address the needs of all students, but they need guidance and coaching in order to address the needs of a diverse community of learners in a changing population. Although differentiated instruction has been in the forefront of discussion and intervention in the last decade, the RTI model allows for differentiation that is data informed through progress monitoring and collaborative planning.

At Garden Elementary, the teachers received professional development and coaching on using center-based reading instruction for all students. This school-wide approach to teaching reading afforded Garden's teachers in-depth training in particular curricula including Read Naturally, (Ihnot, 2003), Great Leaps, (Campbell, 1996) and Quick Reads (Hiebert & Adams, 2003) and resulted in shared responsibility for students' outcomes. Further, the collaborative planning time ensured that educators reviewed students' progress carefully, guaranteeing that all students who needed it received Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports and that their needs would be revisited within the suggested guidelines of the model. In addition, the structure and collaborative emphasis resulted in a shared understanding of what RTI was, how it meets students' needs and how general educators can be more actively engaged in the special education referral, evaluation and planning process.

A goal of this three-year study is to provide insight for others who plan to implement an RTI model. In Year 1, we supported teachers in developing an RTI model that met their specific building needs while collecting data on student academic progress and teacher perceptions about the model. In Year 2, we continued that support while helping teachers to implement the model that they developed. In Year 3, teachers will implement the model with minimal professional development support. We will collect data during Year 3 to determine if teachers' perceptions of the model change.

Acknowledging the historical prevalence of top-down models of educational reform, Hargreaves and Shirley (2009) propose an alternative, suggesting that "inspiring purposes developed and achieved with others are the foundations of successful and sustainable educational change" (p. 75). Garden Elementary educators achieved sustainable change by creating a balance between administrative and faculty roles: Faculty and administrators *together* developed common goals to address the needs of all students, as the RTI model helped close the achievement gap for minority students. To achieve this shared purpose, these educators required a model that, while being responsive to teachers and schools, also focused on students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Finally, a goal was to have educators' perceptions heard and integrated into administrative decisions. Teachers reported a shift from perceiving this RTI implementation as a top-down directive to a shared vision of collaborative practices involving both faculty and administrators.

This investigation suggests teachers perceived that a RTI model was successfully implemented in an urban school with a large percentage of ELLs. It also suggests that when participants perceived the benefits of school reform, they willingly took on the challenges associated with a RTI model and assumed ownership for its sustainability.

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TABLE 1:
*Response to Intervention Model*

| Tier 1<br>Primary Prevention | Tier 2<br>Secondary Prevention | Tier 3<br>Tertiary Prevention. |
|---|---|---|
| DIBELS used as a screener in the fall, winter, and spring<br>Daily explicit instruction targeting phonemic awareness, letter-sound correspondence, decoding, and fluency comprehension and vocabulary delivered in flexible groups | Tier 1 intervention and daily explicit instruction targeting phonemic awareness, letter-sound correspondence, decoding, and fluency delivered in flexible grouping and reviewed for responsiveness every 4-6 weeks. | Tiers 1 and 2 intervention and additional daily 20 minutes of one-to-one support. Responsiveness monitored weekly and potential changes every 4-6 weeks as needed. |
| Students suspected at risk monitored for weekly for eight to twelve weeks | Student progress monitored monthly. Student responsiveness continually assessed. | Student reading progress monitored weekly. Student academic language development progress monitored weekly. |
| Collaborative problem solving at both the building and grade level | Collaborative problem solving at both the building and grade level | Possible multidisciplinary team evaluation. Development and revision of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) if needed. |

TABLE 2:
*Participant Characteristics*

| Pseudonym | Teaching Experience | Licensure | Grade Level | Ethnicity |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sasha | 8 Years | General Education and Sheltered English Instruction Endorsement | Second | Anglo |
| Christy | 9 Years | General Education | Kindergarten | Anglo |
| Susan | 3 Years | Special Education, General Education, and Sheltered English Instruction Endorsement | Third & Fourth | Asian American |
| Sharlene | 3 Years | General Education | Second | African American |
| Keisha | 3 Years | Reading Specialist and Sheltered English Instruction Endorsement | Fifth | Anglo |
| Luisa | 3 Years | Special Education and Sheltered English Instruction Endorsement | First | Latina |
| Tracy | 8 Years | General Education and Sheltered English Instruction Endorsement | First | Anglo |
| Angie | 8 Years | Special Educator and Sheltered English Instruction Endorsement | Third | Latina |

## Appendix

## Focus Group and Individual Interview Prompts

### Focus Group Prompts

- What are some areas that need to change and/or improve at Garden in order for RTI to be successful?
- Concerning collecting data and using the data to make decisions (utilizing a data-driven system) for academics in your classroom, what do you feel are your areas of strength?
- What changes need to be made in order to improve your use of a data-driven system in other areas?
- What barriers do you foresee being encountered (by individuals and the school)?
- Does RTI data help guide instruction?
- Does RTI benefit diverse students? If so, how?
- How involved do you feel with the RTI process at Garden?
- Were there any obstacles to implementing RTI this year? If so, what were they?

### Individual Interview Prompts

- Please describe what RTI "looks like" at the Garden School.
- Describe you role as a stakeholder within this model.
- Who are the other stakeholders?
- What do you see as the main goal of implementing an RTI model at Garden?
- Do you think all stakeholders share the same goal(s)? Why or why not?
- Since the models' inception, what kind(s) of change(s), if any, have you noticed within your building?
- Can you describe the culture of the school during this implementation?
- Do you think school community members (faculty, staff, and students) are "on board" with the implementation of RTI? Why or why not?
- Can you talk about progress monitoring and its impact in your classroom/work, since the implementation of RTI?
- What information does the progress monitoring give you? Does this information change instructional practices?
- What are your reactions to the monthly professional development meetings to discuss the results of progress monitoring?
- Do you think Tier 2 and Tier 3 (in addition to Tier 1 interventions) are necessary and effective?
- How have the three tiers of intervention affected your practice?
- Fifty-two percent of the Garden School's population are English Language Learners (ELLs). Since this is just over half of your students, how does cultural and linguistic diversity impact referrals to special education?
- How do you know "when" to refer students?
- When do you usually refer culturally and linguistically diverse students to receive special education services?
- Has RTI affected the process of referring students to receive special education services at Garden? If so, can you give examples?

- Do you refer students to receive special education services more? Frequently, less frequently or just as frequently as you did before the implementation of RTI? Can you explain why?
- Do you think RTI is "working?" Why or why not?
- Anything else I can add or you'd like to say