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Inclusive Settings: RTI in the General Education Classroom

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Inclusive Settings: RTI in the General Education Classroom

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Abstract

The premise of this study was derived upon seeing a severe need for professional development in my current field work experience. I set out to determine a possible solution to the lack of cohesion among general and special educators evident in my local school district. This small town rural school is looking to expand RTI, and intervention technique, to decrease gaps in education for at risk students. With issues of cohesion and professional development evident, I collected and analyzed data in order to determine a way the school district can still incorporate and expand their Response to Intervention (RTI) practices.

Upon conducting an open interview with teachers at the school, I determined there were many more issues standing in the way of creating an effective system of RTI at the school. Teachers described lack of understanding of founding principles and procedures of RTI as well as their role in its implementation. In the course of data collection, I found teachers to be missing training and materials at their availability in order to successfully make RTI a part of their daily teaching.

Based on the data I collected through interviews with teachers at the school, I determined multiple possible next steps that together help may help them to create an effective RTI program. These include online professional development modules, a schoolwide RTI procedure and policy staff handbook, and a readymade RTI toolkit accessible to all teachers for each grade and content area. With these available and ongoing supports in place by administration, I believe this school could see an improvement in collaboration between educators and the growth of an impactful RTI program for their at risk students.

The Dilemma as Presented Through My Pendulum Theory:

It has been said all throughout my educational pursuit at University that the educational system is a pendulum. This pendulum is, true to its nature, constantly in motion and often reaching opposite peaks of extremity in short order. In the past, the pendulum has reached the peak where all children with severe individual needs were pulled out of the general education classroom and transferred to resource rooms. Individual needs would be fine motor skills, speech/language impairments, or physical disabilities such that one requires a wheelchair for mobility. The more severe disabilities would incorporate the child's IQ falling below the 70 IQ points found as average. Those children who fell below 70 IQ points were termed as IMR or Uneducably Mentally Retarded.

These rooms often held an under qualified parent volunteer who would essentially do the children's homework for them, believing the child incapable of achieving any degree of work themselves. These resource rooms did improve dramatically during their years at the height of social favor. With the advent of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, these rooms came to host a highly qualified special educator who helped the children learn skills needed to complete work with more individual effort displayed.

These broad changes did not happen overnight, but were certainly helped along by the establishment of first Public Law 94-142 or more commonly called the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, then more recently the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004. Public Law 94-142 passed in 1975 established "... free and appropriate public education to each child with a disability. This law had a dramatic, positive impact on millions of children with disabilities in every state and each local community across the country (U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Alexa Posny, 2010)."

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services put out an article, *Thirty-five Years of Progress in Educating Children With Disabilities Through IDEA*, which enumerated the four purposes of this law. The first purpose was "to assure that all children with disabilities have available to them...a free appropriate public education which emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs." The second purpose was "to assure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents...are protected." The third purpose was "to assist states and localities to provide for the education of all children with disabilities. The fourth and final purpose was "to assess and assure the effectiveness of efforts to educate all children with disabilities."

The article goes on to state that this law "was a response to congressional concern for two groups of children", those with no access and those with little access to education. The country was in great need of a law such as this at the time to change public opinion of children with special needs. However, over time, it became prominently acceptable for general educators and parents to seek out and acquire professional diagnoses for their students with perceived difficulties in the classroom. Parents flocked to the bandwagon to get their children additional help in school and to ensure educators became legally bound to help their children.

This swing to special education and Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) became so prominent that in time these special educators in the resource room came to the conclusion that children were being over-diagnosed. They felt in order to proactively combat the growing number of children needing extra help in a resource room, the general education classroom should offer them more opportunities.

So began the push back from special educators. Special educators needed to get the message to parents and general educators that the help they sought for their children should start

in the general education classroom. If general educators were to learn more techniques to reach all children and teach them in a way best for them, the children would be kept in an educational environment that is ideal for all involved. This environment where learning is most beneficial to all is called the Least Restrictive Environment.

The U.S. Department of Education’s IDEA of 2004 states that “Least restrictive environment [includes] In general.--To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004)).

LRE would become an essential concept that came to fuel the creation of the opposite peak the pendulum has come to reach which has been coined inclusion. I have created an image to illustrate my pendulum theory. This image is featured below as Figure 1.

The Pendulum Theory

Figure 1

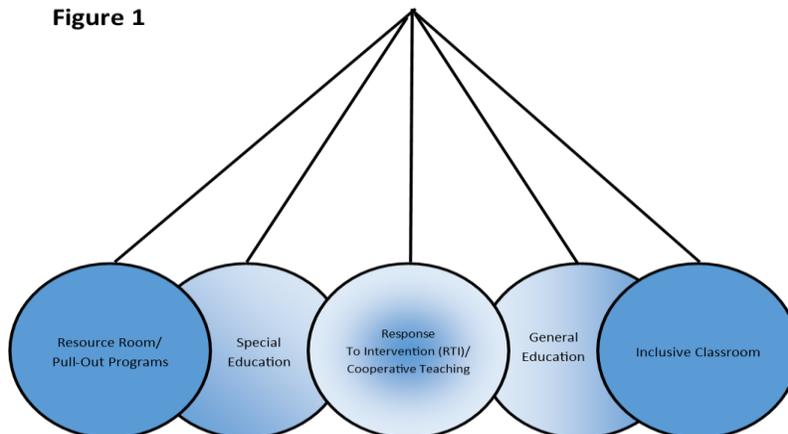


Figure 1

An inclusive classroom thrives on the idea of Least Restrictive Environment offered to all children by the generally trained teacher. The problems of course were soon to arise as they often do when considering anything in terms of extremes. General education teachers are now seen as the children's first line of defense when it comes to determining if the student needs special services or if their needs can be met by differentiation or accommodations in the general education classroom. They are to offer the children learning that is accessible to all and meets the child's needs where they are - not where they should be based on age and grade level.

This process was termed by Lev Vygotsky in 1978. "The zone of proximal development (ZPD) has been defined as the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)" (McLeod, 2012). The problem with all new techniques is that it takes some time for everyone to come to learn them and use them successfully and beneficially.

In my field work, I am seeing now that general education teachers are not trained to teach all children with such diverse learning needs, those children on an IEP, 504, or just require a different method of delivery. These teachers are turning back to special educators for help assisting those at risk children only to find popular opinion has changed and children are being requested to stay in the regular classroom for additional help.

In the absence of assistance from special educators, a system of Response to Intervention (RTI) has been developed as a program general educators should employ to intervene with those at risk youth that are left in their classrooms. I propose the solution for the dilemma of special education versus general education, pull-out programs vs. inclusion, relies on professional development in the area of RTI.

Overview of Response to Intervention

To expand upon my theory of Response to intervention as a viable middle of the road solution, I will define it and offer a brief history. “One way to help educators identify students in need of intervention and implement evidence-based interventions to promote their reading achievement is a framework called ‘response to intervention’”(What Works Clearinghouse, 2015). Spurred on by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1994, Response to intervention is a way to identify more accurately those children with learning disabilities versus those children academically at risk due to other environmental factors. (Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004)).

Other environmental factors which contribute to a child’s difficulty to learn in a traditional classroom setting are a teacher’s method of instruction, child’s rapport with teacher, classroom culture, family culture, and home life. “Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917-2005) developed the *ecological systems theory* to explain how everything in a child and the child's environment affects how a child grows and develops. He labeled different aspects or levels of the environment that influence children's development, including the Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, and Macrosystem” (Oswalt, 2015). “ Response to Intervention looks at the classroom environment and teacher instruction first as a major factor contributing to a child’s struggles with cognitive, behavioral, and social development” (VanDerHeyden).

RTI relies on a three tier system which can be seen in Figure 2 sourced from the Crook County School District in Prineville, Oregon. This school district has made RTI a primary focus with their professional development district-wide and can provide a model for my district. The Oregon Response to Intervention Project, an initiative sponsored by ODE since 2005, provides intensive training and support to 32 Oregon school districts. Training is focused on multi-tiered

instruction, systems requirements, teaming, data analysis, and using the RTI approach to identify learning disabilities (Smith, Fitzpatrick, 2012).

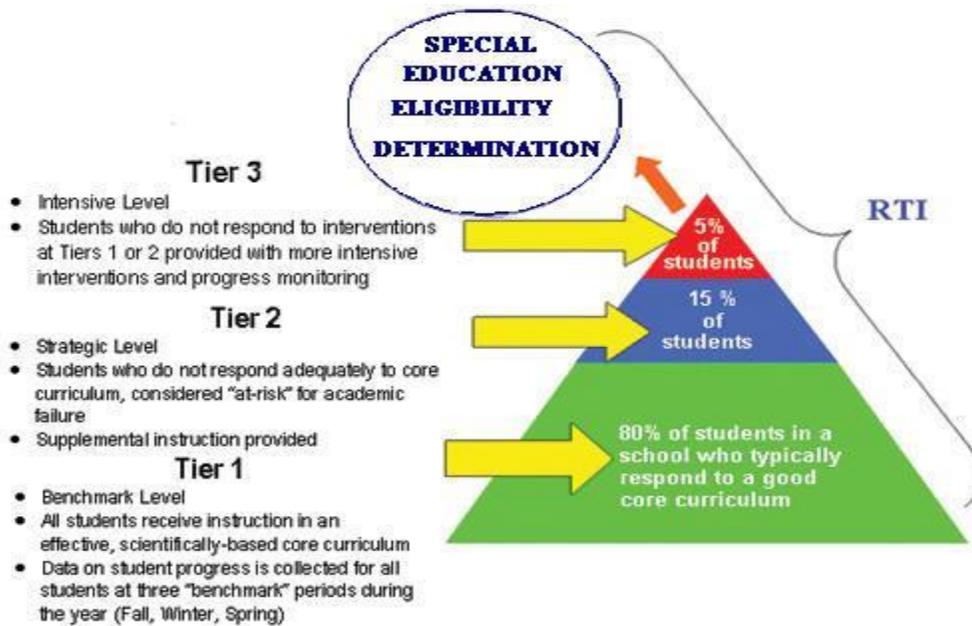


Figure 2

“The What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), an initiative of USDE's Institute of Education Sciences, is a central, trusted source of information for decision makers. Established in 2002, the WWC reviews and assesses research evidence for educational programs, products, practices, and policies” (Reading Recovery Council of North America)

Tier 1

Tier 1 is often described as what general education teachers are already doing. They are charged with the job of teaching a lesson every day to students. The What Works Clearinghouse's studies on RTI suggest that roughly 80% of those students go home every day with an adequate grasp of the lesson that was taught. In other words, they have acquired the foundational knowledge required to come back to school the next day and build upon that knowledge to create a working or applicable understanding of the concepts learned.

That being said, there is a suggested 20% of those students who go home that night lacking the solid knowledge of the basic concept. Those 20% of students make up Tier2. Due to state standards and testing that is a part of tier 1 for all students, the teacher is pressed upon to teach the children the next building block of the concept as soon as the next day. This presents a problem for those students who have not grasped the basic skills yet and need more time to do so or need a different method of delivery from the instructor in order to finally come to understand the initial knowledge the other students gained during the last school day.

A teacher must urge their students onward and upward while wondering what to do with those who fell behind the first day. This does not account for those children who were absent on that beginning day and need to be caught up as well. The teacher must undoubtedly have a bag of tricks at the ready for each concept in order to ensure the children can be caught up in short order. In order for the teacher to have time to work with these children before they become at risk, he or she must have a classroom system in place which allows for the majority of the class to successfully work independently from the teacher while they pull aside those children in need of reteaching.

The experts at Intervention Central, an online RTI database used by my local school district, suggest that Tier 1 and Tier 2 should be used by a teacher as a daily evaluation of their students' knowledge and a reflection of the teacher's instruction that day. Most often, however, the tier systems are used in reference to those children consistently falling into the 80 or 20 percent category. By doing so, a teacher, team, or school can use the data to more effectively identify those struggling students and meet their needs.

To recap, as I see it, there are two difficulties the general education teacher faces on a daily basis while planning a lesson and running their classroom. Firstly, the children must be at school in order to hear the lesson and there must be a preconceived method of assisting those children who do not understand the material the first time they hear it. Secondly, the teacher must have a practiced system in place to manage the learning of the majority of the children in the classroom while intensely improving the knowledge of those children who need help.

To combat the first difficulty, textbook publishing companies such as Pearson have learned that in order to stay relevant in the classroom, they need to offer the teachers a reteach and enrich portion of their purchased materials. While this is a wonderful aide to beginning teachers, it fails to teach the children in a way that is best for them. For example, many classrooms teach with a Teacher's instructor's manual or Basal Reader designed to align with a child's workbook.

“McGraw-Hill My Math can also be used with the data-driven artificial intelligence of ALEKS® to adapt the curriculum and create powerful remediation strategies for students” (McGraw-Hill, 2015). The teacher teaches the children from pre designed workbook pages and then can choose to continue to intervene with the children through worksheets labeled reteach and enrich. The fatal flaw with this system is that if the children failed to absorb the content

initially through using workbook pages, more workbook pages are most likely not a method of instruction that will reach the children.

Subsequently, I see how RTI closely aligns with theorist Howard Gardner's idea of Multiple Intelligences. Through his research, Gardner proposed that every person possesses some of the 9 different intelligences musical, visual, kinesthetic/bodily, naturalistic, existential, auditory, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and linguistic. "This theory has emerged from recent cognitive research and 'documents the extent to which students possess different kinds of minds and therefore learn, remember, perform, and understand in different ways,' according to Gardner (1991)' (Lane). Teachers have been known to do intelligence surveys at the beginning of the year to determine how each child in the classroom learns best. The knowledge gathered then can be taken into account when planning their approach to teaching their lessons to any particular group they may have.

If a teacher knows that their classroom is mostly visual and bodily/kinesthetic, they can plan lessons that show the new concept in bold colors, pictorially, using manipulatives, or having the children get out of their seats for a demonstration. The teacher can save time re-teaching a lesson if they teach to the intelligences their children have. Gardner's theory was also groundbreaking as it proposed that all children need to be taught through their best method of understanding which was previously a practice reserved for children with special needs or learning disabilities. Figure 3 below from Mark Vital includes ideas originally sourced Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences by Howard Gardner and depicts Gardner's understanding of multiple intelligences which drives his theory.

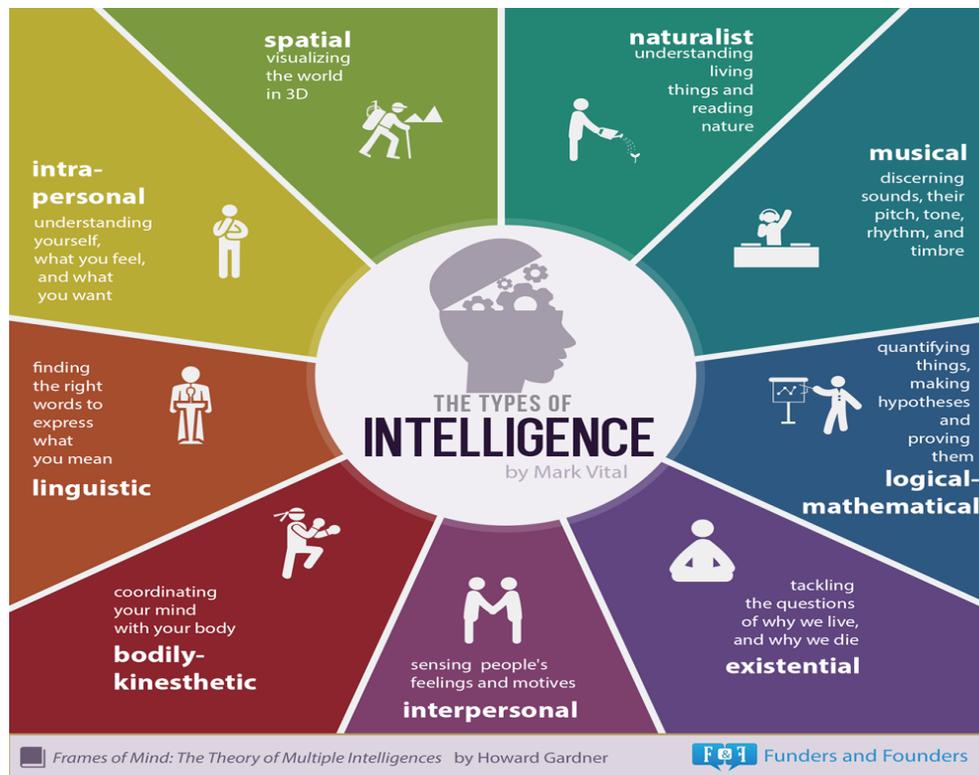


Figure 3 (Vital, 2014)

The discussion of Gardner’s Intelligences leads into the application of the data a teacher acquires as to their students’ Intelligences and therefore how they best learn. This application of different teaching styles based on their children’s Intelligences is called differentiation.

“Teachers in differentiated classrooms accept and act on the premise that they must be ready to engage students in instruction through different approaches to learning, by appealing to a range of interests, and by using varied rates of instruction along with varied degrees of complexity and differing support systems”(Tomlinson,, 2014).

The pendulum can swing closer to the middle with the knowledge and understanding RTI of and Gardner’s Intelligences along with techniques of differentiation. During Tier 1, RTI presents itself as a preventative measure to help teachers prepare a most effective lesson the first time so children do not have to move on to Tier 2 where reteaching and enrichment is necessary. Under the fundamentals of RTI and the importance of differentiated learning for all children,

teachers can begin to open their eyes to a collaboration between general education and special education that has all children's best interests at heart regardless of labels and diagnoses.

Tier 2

Tier 2 is where the teacher actually employs the reteach and enrich activities with the children. “The pace of the direct instruction in tier two is slower and time is spent showing students a knowledge or skill, as well as practicing it, to build a firm foundation. In addition teaching, re-teaching, practice and frequent progress monitoring for each specific skill takes place over a much longer period of time than is feasible in a regular classroom (What Works Clearinghouse/ Tier 2). “Depending on school policy, the group may be given instruction by the general classroom teacher or they may move to a separate classroom and another teacher”(What Works Clearinghouse/ Tier2).

This statement explains clearly that Tier 2 is designed for a slower pace environment which is devoted to seeing the child repeatedly practice a skill or content area standard until mastery before moving on. The article says the district is able to make the determination of whose job description Tier 2 falls under in instances of reading struggles.

This determination however, is made by each district who have no legal obligation to have the children assisted by a special education teacher or a teacher’s aide. One special education teacher can legally handle 16 Individualized Education Plans or IEPs at one time (chapter 3301, Lawriter). Given so, school districts often require a special educator to handle the maximum allowable which may involve one teacher being the special educator for multiple grade levels or buildings in the district. This creates time constraints the teacher may have with each child or grade level which makes it difficult when students and teachers schedules overlap. With one teacher spread over a great many students, it is unlikely that they can offer help to those at risk children in the general education classroom.

This tier is where I am beginning to see that general educators lack the skills and training necessary to help those at risk children as well as lacking the time to give the students the extra instruction they need to be successful. These teachers in an effort to do their job to the best of their ability, go to the building's special educators for help. This presents an internal struggle within the school building of special educators who would love to help and have the expertise required but cannot offer their time and general educators who have an obligation to help these students but lack the time and techniques required to do so.

The administrators are in an interesting position as well as they have their special educators spread very thin and no legal obligation to have them assist general educators with these children. It is in the best interest of administrators to keep the cost of hiring special educators low while trying to improve their overall school report card and remain an exemplary educational institution in the eyes of the state. Which brings us to tier 3.

Tier 3

“Most often, students receiving tier three interventions are taught by a teacher who is trained in using the specialized techniques needed to help students with cognitive learning difficulties” (What Works Clearinghouse/ Tier 3). However, research does not specifically state that students entering tier 3 must be taught by a special educator, but by someone trained to intervene, perhaps a general educator who received adequate professional development.

Length of time given for a child to comprehend the content is greatly expanded from tier 2 to tier 3. Meeting times with the student should be extended and the child should receive this intensive course of study over a longer period of time throughout the year. “If the student is successful after this intensive intervention, they return to tier two. If they are not successful, they may be screened for special education if they have not been screened already” (What Works Clearinghouse/ Tier 3).

Field Work Setting

Recently I was at a local district's professional development training day. Teachers from all grade levels district-wide were asked to sit in the auditorium together while the school psychologist, primarily from the elementary school, began to tell us about RTI. I as a student teacher was thrilled! I was hearing terms and ideas mentioned by her that had been thoroughly discussed by my professors in my college courses. I felt like a real teacher, I took notes and I was eager to learn if there was more to RTI than was already espoused to me. I began looking around the auditorium to share my enjoyment of the topic with my fellow teachers.

Much to my surprise and chagrin, I saw many a bored eye in the audience and many a blatant cellphone worshipper. I was shocked! I was used to the attitudes of my former college classmates, texting, complaining, and grumbling about having to sit in class. I would have never expected the same behavior from teachers!

I decided to crack a joke to a teacher sitting next to me who was on their phone in an effort to determine what she felt about the seminar. She responded to me by saying, "this is for special educators". I assumed she meant to justify her complete lack of attention to or interest in the presenter by stating that she did not need the information presented because she in fact was a general educator and not a special educator.

I heard myself in my head start spouting off in a very irate tone of voice, "Are you kidding me? Have you not heard a word she has said?! Every other word has been, 'general educators are these children's first line of defense when it comes to staying with the pack.'" I realized that sometimes this attitude is just the way it is and I need to do all I can to protect myself from it and to combat it in my own philosophies on teaching.

The school psychologist then handed the floor over to a pair of special educators. These women talked about how much general educators could do for all children in their classrooms to prevent the need for any child to advance to special education. They began sharing some of their own stories about trying to assist children over the years. As time grew on I came to realize just how passionately these teachers were speaking. Their tone of voice had changed completely and they were almost begging the audience to hear them when they say that helping these children is not only a special educator's job, but a general educator's responsibility as well.

These ladies effectively pronounced for me the current location of the pendulum. Special educators are pushing back, saying these children's needs can be met in a general education classroom by an effective general education teacher. These special educators were positively stating that the job of a general educator is to educate all and that children should only advance to the stages of special education as a last resort. The ladies also called on parents to realize that their children most often need to receive effectively designed instruction in a general classroom and that their perceived learning disabilities are not such that a doctor need diagnose.

I began to hear comments from general educators in the auditorium saying that they do not have time for such specialized instruction and that special educators should do their jobs. I also heard mentioned from general educators that they do not know the first thing when it comes to implementing RTI and that at the moment it is not practical. It was then that I realized we had reached a stalemate. There were special educators in one corner contending that general educators are responsible for all children's learning until it can be determined a child needs special services that the general educator cannot provide and general educators in the other corner advocating for more assistance in and out of their classrooms from special educators.

Then I began to see a much deeper matter at hand. General educators do not know how to implement RTI because they have never been trained to do so. The school district's idea of professional development on RTI was to show us some charts and to have special educators plead their case. What the teachers really need is to receive actual training on research based curricula for each given subject they must cover during the school year for their grade level.

Barak Rosenshine is a professor of educational psychology in the College of Education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Through his studies, he contends that “the most effective teachers ensured that their students efficiently acquired, rehearsed, and connected background knowledge by providing a good deal of instructional support. They provided this support by teaching new material in manageable amounts, modeling, guiding student practice, helping students when they make errors, and providing for sufficient practice and review.”

He suggests that teachers in the general education classroom need to be trained on basic practices to ensure the effectiveness of their instruction. The result of his studies provides abundant support for the idea that general educators need to “provide for sufficient practice and review” as RTI models would suggest. He also speaks about delivering the material in small amounts and then following up with the students as they create more concrete foundational knowledge of the given topic. Rosenshine asks teachers to continue guiding the children through the lesson a little at a time and to break free from the idea that a child will someday simply have acquired the basic knowledge.

RTI practices intend for teachers to be trained in research based curriculum instruction and then they must be trained in research based intervention techniques and methods that are

proven first steps to helping the children move back down the tiers in a way that will keep them with their grade level peers.

These ideas of research based instruction have been impressed upon me during my coursework and they are what came to mind when I uncovered the less than favorable atmosphere of my local school district. There was a discord between what I felt I had learned to be the desired way of operating a classroom and understanding of staff roles within a school and what I was coming to realize as a lack of these aforementioned concepts in the local school district. Moving forward in my understanding of the school district I was placed in and their methods of operation.

I set out to do my own research to determine the current standing of the school's Response to Intervention system. My goal was to figure out in what step the school was in their policies and implementation of RTI and determine what the next steps would be as well as how to successfully implement them. My method of doing so are outlined in the following Methods section.

Field Work Data Collection Methods and Results

I decided to conduct an interview involving the six teachers on my grade-level team. I determined these were the teachers I was offered the best access to during collaborative planning periods. I also felt that these teachers would be able to offer me the best perspective of how RTI fits into the operation of the school day based on our shared students and my wealth of knowledge regarding their daily duties and responsibilities.

I met with the teachers ahead of time to discuss the premise of my study as it was derived from the school's desire to implement RTI and to assist the teachers in beginning to use the techniques in their classrooms. I did not describe to the teachers my desire to determine for myself the discord between theory and practice as I laid out before you in the previous section of this text.

I recited to the participants that I would say each question aloud and ask them to raise their hand if their answer was yes and to leave their hand down on the table if their answer was no. After I asked the question, I recorded a yes and no based on their show of hands. I went around the table the same direction each time so that the same individual's answers would be in a given column for the entirety of the interview.

I marked ahead of time if the teacher was in the field of general education, title 1, or special education. This would assist me later on in analyzing patterns based on my desire to determine the more broad question of general educators' and special educators' understandings of each other's roles in the process of RTI implementation.

After, I recorded their answers, I opened the field for any comments required to ascertain a deeper understanding of their reasoning behind their given answers of yes or no. I have denoted

those in the table and those additional comments can be found in the appendix section for further study.

Table 1 below depicts my findings from an interview I conducted during a teacher grade level meeting. This first part of the interview was designed to illuminate the mindset of the teachers after the seminar on RTI. This I believed would assist me in determining what next steps in the RTI implementation process they would be willing to explore, if any.

| Question | Gen Ed 1 | Gen Ed 2 | Gen Ed 3 | Gen Ed 4 | Gen Ed 5 | Title I | Special Ed |
|--|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|---------|------------|
| Was the seminar helpful in offering you needed information about RTI practices in the general education classroom? | N | N | N | N | Y | Y | Y |
| Will you employ suggested RTI techniques in your classroom after hearing the seminar? | Y* | Y* | N | N | Y | Y* | Y* |
| Would you learn to incorporate RTI if there was time built into the school day to perform RTI? | Y* | Y* | Y* | Y* | Y* | Y* | Y* |
| Do you feel the school offers adequate training and support for teachers based on their expectations for RTI? | N | N | N | N | N | N | N |
| At this time, do you feel it is your role as an educator to perform RTI in the classroom on an ongoing basis? | N* | N* | N | N | N* | Y* | N* |

Table 1

Based on the first table, I uncovered somewhat what I had expected their responses to be. When asked if they found the seminar helpful, 4 out of 7 teachers responded “no”. I noted both the special educator and the title teacher replied “yes”. This harkened me back to the seminar’s speaker making the comment “the general educators are the first line of defense”. This first question quantified to me that the general educators indeed did not feel it was their duty to actively participate in the seminar as the information that was disseminated they felt was not applicable to them.

The responses also told me that the special educator and title teacher felt as if they could benefit from it or at the very least, they had latched on to some familiar terms during the seminar which told them it was their area of expertise, terms such as intervention, RTI, and at risk.

The second question asked the teachers if they would employ RTI in their classrooms. I was surprised that so many of them had raised their hand and said “yes” after the comments they had made about the seminar not being directed towards them. Upon opening the floor for comments, the educators explained that they would employ RTI if the special educator would come into the classroom and pull aside those kids in need of intervention. The title teacher explained that she often comes into the general education classroom to help assist the teacher in just such a manner.

The special educator explained to me later on as an aside that she had originally come into the general education classroom to work with the children in the beginning of the year, however, since then she has been taking the children to the resource room to work due to differences of opinion between her and the general educator. This was illuminating for me and certainly offered me proof of the lack of cohesion among the teachers.

The third question posed to them the idea of using RTI in the classroom if they had time built into the daily schedule to do so. Unsurprisingly, all agreed that RTI became a strong possibility given the extra time to implement it in the classroom.

The fourth question implored if they felt they were offered enough training by the school administration based on expectations of the implementation of RTI in the daily classroom. They all responded “no”. During the seminar, the school psychologist had discussed forms the teachers were to fill out upon completing RTI in the classroom. The school psychologist went on to say that if any of the teachers had a difficult student they needed additional materials for, they could email her and she would put literature on her Google Docs for them to read.

The school had hosted an in depth professional development training on how to use Google Docs, however, when I inquired to the teachers they reported that they still were unaware how to access materials from the school psychologist and they would prefer a different way to access information on RTI.

The final question offered me, I feel, the most insight into the texture of the school environment and the understanding the teachers had of RTI. This question asked if each teacher felt it was in their job description to complete RTI in their classroom. The only one to answer “yes” was the title teacher. A Title 1 teacher is responsible for performing RTI with students. Their job is almost exclusively to act as an interventionist with children at risk of failing in the areas of math and language arts.

When pressed, the general educators contended that the special educators had access to all the materials for interventions as well as the training and time available to do so. On the other hand, the special educator contended that her job is to focus on content and skills based IEP goals only and it is the general educator who is responsible for those at risk children in their

classroom not on IEPs. The special educator went on to share with me that upon the request of the general educator, she has taken on additional students for help in her resource room that do not include those on IEPs.

On a separate occasion, the aforementioned general educator came to express to me that she does not understand how she is supposed to be able to accommodate those children in her classroom as they are very low functioning and cannot keep up with the class. She feels they are being better assisted in the resource room with the special educator as the pace can be modified for them without becoming a detriment to the rest of the group.

With this round of interviews complete, I sat down to compile my findings and research some possible next steps which would help meet the teacher's needs in regards to implementing RTI in their classrooms. I came up with a series of new questions to ask the teachers in a second and final interview to gauge their willingness to employ RTI given additional training and materials as requested in the initial interview process.

The second interview was conducted again at a round table meeting during grade-level team planning time. The process of raising hands for "yes" and leaving them on the table for "no" as well as the open forum to offer illuminating statements was followed for this interview again as it was originally. Table 2 on the next page depicts my questions posed and responses gathered for the second teacher interview.

| Question | Gen Ed 1 | Gen Ed 2 | Gen Ed 3 | Gen Ed 4 | Gen Ed 5 | Title I | Special Ed |
|--|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|---------|------------|
| Would an online option for RTI professional development assist you in employing RTI techniques in the classroom? | Y* | Y | Y* | N* | Y* | Y | Y |
| Do you feel you would benefit from an assigned mentor from the staff assisting you learn and employ RTI? | N | N | N | Y | Y* | Y | Y* |
| Do you feel you would be more likely to employ RTI techniques if offered full access to a premade RTI curriculum? | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y* | Y | Y |
| Do you feel you have adequate materials available to you to employ RTI on an ongoing and consistent basis? | N* | N* | N | N | N* | Y* | Y* |
| Do you see cooperation between teachers as an obstacle for the employment of RTI in the school district as it stands | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N | Y |

Table 2

In the first question, I ask the teachers if an online option for professional development regarding RTI would be an improvement over the in-person seminar method. The teachers felt that completing the seminar online would grant them an in-depth version of RTI and techniques in the classroom in a digest manner.

The second question was based on my previous findings of the uncohesive environment between special educators and general educators. The special educators know how to use Response to Intervention and the general educators are being asked to learn. I felt that the school district should use the teachers as available resources to assist in the training of general educators. However, the interview made it clear to me that the teachers were looking for outside

help on learning how to perform RTI and some were still convinced that it was not their role to conduct interventions in their classrooms to begin with.

The third question was developed in response to the information that the general educators did not have the time to find their own materials as existing materials were not readily available to them. Overwhelmingly, the teachers responded “yes” they would be more likely to conduct interventions if there were ready made toolkits for each standard in their content area that they could go to and use with little additional work added to their busy plates.

The fourth question was created to ensure that the third question was valid. It proves again that the teachers do not feel they have adequate materials. The final question asks if they feel that the lack of cooperation between general and special educators stands as an obstacle impeding the progress the school district is trying to make with policy for Response to Intervention. All but one teacher found teacher collaboration to be a main obstacle that would need to improve before interventions can take place in the classroom.

Recommended Next Steps

“The reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 2004 permits the use of response to intervention (RTI) to explore whether students make adequate progress and what interventions should be provided to them. The implementation of RTI is mandated in many k-12 schools in the U.S. (Kuo, 2014).”

In determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, a local education agency may use a process that determines if a child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as part of the evaluation procedures used to determine if the child is a child with a disability (IDEA 2004, P.L. 108-446, Section 614(b) (6)).

“There is a need for extensive professional development and strong understanding of scientifically based curricula and instruction by teachers before teams can make assumptions about a student’s need for increased support (i.e., Tier II)” (What Works Clearinghouse/Tier 2). The basis for the success of RTI relies on the idea that the curriculum delivered to the students and the method of delivery are both scientifically proven and research based. Wendy W. Murawski and Claire E. Hughes of California State University Department of Special Education contend that as general educators become trained in research based curricula and methods through professional development, the gap between special educators and general educators will close. This will allow for more understanding of each other’s job descriptions and more collaboration to keep the children on track.

I am in a college program designed to help students graduate in four years with a dual licensure in Inclusive Special Education. This means that during my college career I have been taught by both general educators and special educators. This has offered me a window into a unique perspective on the blurred lines between the two fields. I have often heard my special

educator professors proclaim that special education gets no respect. They have also recounted to me some stories about being a special educator who works inside a general education classroom. I believe part of the solution is more college programs like the one I have gone through to bridge the gap between the special and general fields of education.

Online RTI Professional Development

One possible solution would be professional development. All educators need to be reeducated and brought up to speed on the change of times between special educators and general educators. Some special educators say the only way for this to occur is to phase out the teachers with old ideals through retirement and the new teachers coming up fresh out of college will come with the understanding of roles of general educators and special educators. This bridges a long standing gap between the two worlds.

Other teachers say, unfortunately, not all new teachers have developed this understanding, so the problem still continues. Building on this thought, many student teacher mentors from school districts are chosen based on their senior status. This implies that the teacher has been an integral part of the school system for a long time and has been chosen accordingly to pass down their knowledge to the next generation.

Unfortunately, I have seen many a student mentor teacher pass on less than favorable dispositions about special education and RTI as well as inclusion as a whole. The transmission of these negative outlooks can seriously harm the progress schools and education as a conglomerate are trying to make. Now I am confronted with a few questions I must sift through when looking for an answer to our RTI implementation problems.

First of all, how do we reeducate people if they do not listen to the professional development speaker in the first place and do not see the merit in learning about what they are being called upon to do in their classroom? Then I begin to wonder, do these teachers have an understanding that they are the ones responsible for carrying out the RTI and not the special education teachers? The principal does not require teachers to work together on designing ways to reach those children on IEPs in the general education classroom. I have learned from teachers

that all teachers receive an awareness document on each child with an IEP via email at the beginning of the school year.

There is nothing that enforces a general education teacher's fidelity in following the IEPs during their instruction to the children in the classroom. Essentially, a general educator could choose to skim the awareness document and choose not to employ any of the techniques required of them by the document. The techniques could include longer wait time, the child might need to be read to every time they are asked to complete a test or assignment, or the child could be allowed to get out of their seat as many times as they need to during a lesson; just to name a few. I believe that professional development to refresh the importance of these extra measures as integral to the children's learning would be imperative; not to mention these techniques are legally required to be followed.

During my search for a solution to becoming knowledgeable and utilizing RTI in the general education classrooms I came across a few new variables. Special educators in my building are looking for a way to get in touch with and assist general educators with the process of RTI and managing those children in the classroom without insulting senior teachers by insinuating they need help. I have found that most senior teachers want help from anyone who can tell them how to perform these tasks, but they also become protective of their time and state that they simply do not have time to perform RTI or accommodations without an extra section of the day specifically allotted for such duties.

My original solution to the problem of educating teachers on the use of RTI in the classroom was to offer an online professional development option. The teachers expressed distaste for the professional development seminar we attended as part of our teacher inservice, yet they still wished for a way to complete RTI with their children that was more manageable.

The IRIS Center of Vanderbilt Peabody College and Claremont Graduate University is a company which allows for online professional development for RTI. Figure 4 from IRIS lists the 15 different modules and 2 case studies they provide for RTI training.

My idea was that the teachers could complete an online training module through IRIS, an online training option. The online option would allow them to use their staff/professional development days more effectively and mold it to their schedule of other items needing completion in their classrooms on these days. The teachers also expressed interest in the online training as it would count as CEUs, which would go toward the professional development hours required every 5 years for licensure renewal.

When I approached the teachers in my district about this possible method of obtaining more information about RTI, they continued to express displeasure in the idea of taking time out of their staff day to complete professional development. They would much rather spend the day working on their classrooms and improving their upcoming lesson plans. However, that being said, they believed the online module would assist in answering some of their questions about RTI and it would benefit them more than a formal seminar would.

RTI Toolkit

The teachers also expressed a desire to have ready-made RTI materials for each lesson they teach. They implied a readiness to follow through on RTI with children if there was an easy and consistent go-to method of delivery. The teachers felt RTI meant they were being called upon to perform additional work with the children. Their reluctance to complete RTI daily with students drastically reduced if appropriate materials were to be provided. This brought me to the idea of whose job it is to supply given additional materials required to perform RTI in the inclusive classroom.

In my coursework, I have been taught the proper process any effective teacher goes through is summed up with the acronym TPA, Teach, Plan, Assess. I would be so bold as to modify this process by suggesting the order be rearranged to Plan, Teach, Assess, or Teach, Assess, Plan. We are taught that every effective teacher goes through this process on a daily basis. The idea is that you plan your teaching very specifically for the needs of all the children in the classroom and your assessment should directly align with the objectives that were taught.

Then a teacher should look at the results of the assessment to determine if the children require reteaching or enrichment on the lesson or if the class can move on to the next developmental step in the content area. This determination would be made using the RTI 3-tiered system. If 80 percent of the class understood the information, they can move on to the next content area as those children remain in tier 1. The other 20 percent of the class would be broken up into tier 2 and tier 3 respectively based on the results of their assessments. These children require reteaching of the lesson.

A most effective teacher goes even a step further and applies differentiation to his or her teaching. This teacher would methodically and specifically give children different assignments

based on their needs described by the RTI model, including, reteaching, enrichment, or more practice. Upon speaking to the general educators in my student teaching experience I have found that they do not usually follow this highly individualized approach to teaching.

Through observation of the teachers, I have discovered a common thread of methodology. They use whole group instruction most often followed by independent work. The independent time most often allows the teacher the time to pull those children aside who were absent and get them caught up with missing work and get grades entered in the gradebook for them.

Upon sharing my findings with a special educator, they responded by saying the independent time would be most effectively spent by performing RTI. She said this could take on any form the teacher saw fit. It could be having all of the children focus on different areas based on their needs or the teacher could group them to make it more manageable. The teacher would need an assignment to reteach certain students, to enrich other students, and offer more practice to those who need it. I see a lot of worksheets given during independent time as a way to manage behavior while keeping the students busy at their seats while the teacher focuses her attention on getting others caught up on assignments.

However, I have seen most effective teachers set up different stations or centers around the room for children to visit during this time. This would change the method of teaching to small group collaborative instruction. Along with this, the children would become more talkative and excitable and may require more direction on how to navigate each station. This method takes a bit of preplanning and more involvement in practicing and demonstrating the learning stations. The teacher must decide if the stations are a good option to drive home the lesson and therefore worth the extra time setting up.

This model of RTI most realistically could be used a few times during the course of teaching a single concept such as fractions. This can be done as an initial way to teach a lesson or later on for more hands-on RTI. Lakeshore RTI for Mathematics is a possible ready-made solution for RTI in the general education classroom. This would act as a tool kit for RTI that the teachers were looking for.

If any child is still struggling with a particular skill or needs a refresher, the teacher can pick from the tool kit and copy the activity for that child. All the materials for the entire RTI process are included, practice, differentiation, reteaching, enrichment, and progress monitoring as well as the next developmental step the teacher should take with the child. This system comes with a most differentiated methodology looking at the math specifically, they include a storybook for those students who connect better through language arts.

Response to Intervention Staff Handbook

Through my research, I feel I have uncovered another integral part of the solution that I have been missing. I have discovered a school district that has approached the idea of RTI very holistically, Harrison County Elementary Schools. They have decided to put out a staff handbook specifically involving the school's position and policies regarding RTI. This handbook tells teachers how to design their lessons and what the district expects from them in regards to RTI.

The very cover of the handbook is the RTI pyramid with 3 labeled tiers and arrows surrounding the pyramid in the circle. The arrows are labeled Interventions, Universal Screenings, and Progress Monitoring. In the appendices of this text I have included the table of contents for the RTI Staff Handbook as well as an image of their RTI pyramid.

The timeline depicts an academic year of interventions. Response to Intervention along with its components are explained in the first few pages of the booklet. The components of RTI include Universal Screening, the Pyramid of Interventions, Progress Monitoring, and Grade Level Team Meetings. The Decision Making Guide and Responsibilities of Staff are two of my favorite pages in the handbook. The Guide offers teachers more information to assist them in understanding how to respond to the children's needs, it includes more information to consider when making decisions that you might otherwise not think about.

The Responsibilities of Staff page, in a very detailed manner, lays out for everyone in the school the responsibilities of each staff member.

“Classroom teachers in this district are responsible to attend RTI meetings twice a month following the timeline at the beginning of the handbook. They are responsible to follow a system to provide tier 2 and tier 3 interventions with help from support staff. They must complete progress monitoring for

students who receive RTI services every other week for tier 1/ tier 2 and weekly for tier 3 students.

They must complete an intervention tracking sheet for each RTI student. They must maintain appropriate communication with parents of student progress, including sending a letter home when a student enters RTI or changes tiers. Finally, they duties include any other responsibilities assigned by the building principal at their discretion.

Resource teachers are responsible to attend monthly grade level meetings. They must also attend grade level meetings of all tier 3 students at discretion of building principal. To provide information and resources to teachers on strategies and use of programs. To provide some tier 2 and tier 3 interventions when appropriate (collaboration time). Finally, their duties include any other responsibilities assigned by the building principal at their discretion.”

I very much enjoyed this Responsibilities of Staff page because it very clearly told all persons what their involvement should be in the RTI process. This allows Special Educators, here referred to as Resource Teachers, to offer help and guidance to General Educators without fear of insulting a senior year teacher. This was an issue I saw in my school district which I believe this handbook handles very well.

I also believe this handbook would help my school district because the General Education Classroom Teachers would learn that they are responsible for these interventions, but it also allows so much support to these teachers. Following the policies outlined in this handbook, General Educators could take responsibility for keeping children caught up with the general coursework and Special Educators could spend their time in the resource room with the children

working on their specific IEP goals only. This would immensely increase growth on the children's goals.

The forms required of the General Educators to fill out as documentation are included in the handbook as well. The contract included in the handbook makes the parent aware of how their child is doing right away and all parties involved must agree to help said child. Along with the contract, there is a fidelity agreement which keeps the parent accountable for helping their child reach the benchmarks of the grade level.

The forms included allow teachers to keep documentation of when the parent became aware of the child struggling academically, socially, or behaviorally. There are forms that the teacher completes to document when each round of RTI happens with the child and the outcome of it. This allows the teacher to have documentation to present during a meeting with the parent as evidence of intervention being done to help the child. The contract that all parties, including the teacher, parent, child, and RTI representative must sign states, the "Big Goal- My child will perform math on or above grade level by the end of this school year" at the bottom of the page.

This goal can be referred to every time participants meet to discuss the child's RTI. At the end of the year, if the child still is not meeting his grade level goal, the teachers can reasonably apply to the parent for the retention of their child. The RTI tracker forms can be presented at that time to represent the case for retention. It can be seen then that the child is making great strides in the right direction and they need to continue doing so in that grade with the teachers who already have a working system of RTI in place for the child.

Retention is never an easy subject to broach with any parent. However, telling a parent that their child is recommended for retention seems like a much better scenario when the parent has been an integral part of the process from the start and they were aware of the goal that needs

to be met. The parent will be more likely to understand all that has been done to help their child and that the teachers hold the child's best interests at heart when they speak of the possibility of retention, after documentation of intense RTI has been presented. Retention in this case means allowing the child to stay in the best possible setting for him/her to continue making great gains toward grade level content competency.

I believe given online professional development training in the area of Response to Intervention in conjunction with a readily accessible RTI toolkit and a RTI Staff handbook, my local school district administrators can offer the materials, training, and support their educators need in order to successfully implement a Response to Intervention program in their classrooms. In the beginning when we first sat down in that professional development training on Response to Intervention, it was disheartening the response the school psychologist was receiving from the teachers.

Their responses brought many questions to my mind, which I later posed to them in an interview fashion. I then compiled that data and it proved to me there was indeed as I had previously hypothesized, a lack of cohesion among the educators in the differing fields of special education and general education. I took the concerns I found evident from the initial interview and created a second interview based on possible solutions to each concern they raised, such as lack of time, training, and materials available to them.

Based on the responses from the second interview, my proposed next steps for these educators and their administrators to circumvent the issues of time, materials, training and support, and lack of cohesion among teachers, all in regards to response to intervention, are online professional development training, a readymade RTI toolkit, and a Staff Handbook for RTI. I believe the implementation of RTI in this school district at the policy level and in the

classrooms at a practicing level can only be realized through a multitude of solutions coming together to address each of the main issues. That being said, if these next steps I have suggested take place, the school district should see an astounding increase in teacher cooperation and willingness to perform Response to Intervention in their classrooms on a daily basis.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Additional Comments acquired during staff teacher interviews:
Derived from [Table 1]

*Name modifications have been made in some instances to protect the anonymity of the volunteers.

Q: Will you employ suggested RTI techniques in your classroom after hearing the seminar?

A: Gen Ed 1: "Yes, if the special education teacher wants to come into my classroom and help then that's fine. I don't know how they expect us to do it on our own with everything else we have to teach. When are we supposed to do this?"

A: Gen Ed 2: "Yes, when [the Title] teacher comes in, we get in three groups and we rotate. So they work on revising and editing with her."

A: Title 1: "Yes, I come in to ****'s classroom and we do groups daily."

A: Special Ed: "Yes, I am constantly working on getting the kids caught up on the stuff they miss in class, even though I don't feel I am responsible for doing that. But where else are the kids gonna get help?"

Q: Would you learn to incorporate RTI if there was time built into the school day to perform RTI?

A: Gen Ed 1-5: "Yes, we used to have an intervention period at the end of the day, but we used it to get caught up on grading or students with absent work."

A: Title I: "Yes, I came into the general education classroom during those times to work with children who needed to get caught up with absent work or if they missed a test and had to make something up."

Special Ed: "Yes, the time is supposed to be used for interventions if a child does not understand something they are supposed to know before they go on to the next thing. The time was misused so they voted to cut it out of the school day this year."

Q: At this time, do you feel it is your role as an educator to perform RTI in the classroom on an ongoing basis.

A: Gen Ed 1: "No, I do not have time to do this in the classroom along with everything else that has to get done. With testing and field trips and programs in the school, when are we supposed to teach anything?"

A: Gen Ed 2: "No, it's all I can do just to get my grades in on time."

A: Gen Ed 5: "No, that's the Special Ed teacher's job, pretty soon they won't have to do anything. I send my kids down there with her every day and I don't even know what they do when their down there, I hope it's not a waste of time."

A: Title I: "Yes, it is literally in my job description to intervene with at risk children in Language Arts. Title 1 Reading is what it is called."

A: Special Ed: "No, it is not my job to do interventions with these kids. The general educators do not want to waste their time going back and reteaching things, so I offer to take those kids so they aren't going to fall behind. Really I am just specifically supposed to work on their IEP goals when they are with me."

Additional Comments acquired during staff teacher interviews:
Derived from [Table 2]

Q: Would an online option for RTI professional development assist you in employing RTI techniques in the classroom?

A: Gen Ed 1: "Yes, I would love that! That way we can ask it the questions we really need answered and we do not have to sit through a talk session that doesn't answer any of our questions!"

A: Gen Ed 3: "Yes, you know it would be very nice to have some of our day back to use like a staff day to get stuff done."

A: Gen Ed 4: "No, see, quite frankly, I don't wanna do that. I just want to use my day as a staff day. Just give me the whole day. Our professional development days are a joke anyhow because we don't even really have a professional development program do we?"

A: Gen Ed 5: "Yes, I can see spending part of the day doing the modules and then the rest of the day getting caught up on gradebook and cleaning my classroom. And you said you get professional development credit hours toward renewal, right?"

Q: Do you feel you would benefit from an assigned mentor from the staff assisting you learn and employ RTI?

A: Gen Ed 5: "Yes, I would not mind if a Special Ed teacher came to my room and did it, that way I could focus on other stuff I need to get done."

A: Special Ed: "I think it would be nice to have someone come in and show us what we are supposed to be doing."

Q: Do you feel you would be more likely to employ RTI techniques if offered full access to a premade RTI curriculum?

A: Gen Ed 5: "Yes, absolutely! If it was something I could grab out of the box and copy when I know they are not getting it. That would be great. I just don't understand where they expect us to find all the materials to reteach the lesson. You know the book has worksheets you give them if they don't get the lesson or if it was too easy for them. But, I don't really like the way the book does it, but they bought it for us so we gotta use it. If it was a ready-made center I could just plop on the desk and say 'here we are doing centers today' that would be great, I would use that."

Q: Do you feel you have adequate materials available to you to employ RTI on an ongoing and consistent basis?

A: Gen Ed 1: "No, I don't feel like I have anything. And another thing, I don't know what forms they are talking about or when we are supposed to use them."

A: Gen Ed 2: "No, they said we could email ***** , she said she has all the forms and she can send them to you."

A: Gen Ed 5: "No, all the stuff is down in the Special Ed room, we don't have any of that stuff."

A: Title I: "Yes, my room is full of intervention stuff. Once again, that is my job."

A: Special Ed: "Yes, we have tons of intervention stuff we use on a daily basis. The other teachers have never asked to use it, and they just said they knew it was down there, so why don't they use it?"



Figure 4 (Harrison County Schools)

Appendix B

1. Classroom Assessment (Part 1): An Introduction to Monitoring Academic Achievement in the Classroom
 2. Classroom Assessment (Part 2): Evaluating Reading Progress
 3. Evidence-Based Practices (Part 1): Identifying and Selecting a Practice or Program
 4. Evidence-Based Practices (Part 2): Implementing a Practice or Program with Fidelity
 5. Evidence-Based Practices (Part 3): Evaluating Learner Outcomes and Fidelity
 6. High-Quality Mathematics Instruction: What Teachers Should Know
 7. Intensive Intervention (Part 1): Using Data-Based Individualization To Intensify Instruction
 8. Intensive Intervention (Part 2): Collecting and Analyzing Data for Data-Based Individualization
 9. RTI (Part 1): An Overview
 10. RTI (Part 2): Assessment
 11. RTI (Part 3): Reading Instruction
 12. RTI (Part 4): Putting It All Together
 13. RTI (Part 5): A Closer Look at Tier 3
 14. RTI: Considerations for School Leaders
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