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Response to Intervention in the Middle School:
Examining One Middle School's Readiness to Implement an RTI Framework

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Abstract

This study was conducted to determine the readiness of one middle school to implement an RTI framework under the AIS provision of the state education regulations. The study took place amongst the ELA department of a suburban middle school and data collected included teacher questionnaires and interviews as well as an observation of a department meeting. The data showed that assets and barriers existed. The primary asset was the knowledge and expertise of the teaching staff and their willingness to make changes. The barriers included scheduling, communication, and lack of a clear vision for curriculum and pedagogical practices.

Response to Intervention in the Middle School: Examining One Middle School's Readiness to Implement an RTI Framework

In this paper, I investigated a middle school's ability to implement a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework to provide Academic Intervention Services (AIS) to students not meeting standards at the intermediate level (grades 6-8) according to the current New York State Standards. Many adolescents, for one reason or another, have not been able to adopt school house literacies which would allow them to demonstrate success on state assessments. While the value of the literacies privileged on the state assessments may be questionable, the failure of certain students to meet these expectations has several repercussions. First, students not meeting standards in the intermediate grades are at risk for not graduating high school. Failure to achieve this distinction then prevents them from being accepted into communities and institutions typically associated with socioeconomic success (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). Second, not meeting standards year after year marginalizes these students, leaving them with a sense of inferiority. These judgments are often internalized, thus creating an endless cycle whereby students are prevented from being able to meet standards in the future because of a loss of confidence and a feeling that they are somehow lacking in intelligence or ability (Brozo, 2009). Third, the repeated failure of students of marginalized or underprivileged communities, which may be seen in the high incidences of learning disability classifications for members of those communities (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006), may serve to strengthen perceptions of weakness in those communities. Finally, unless the dominant perspective is questioned from within, it does not stand much chance of changing in any significant way. Those who possess literacy have an advantage and may be able to challenge dominant views of literacy and language (Street, 1993).

According to The University of the State of New York, State Education Department (2000), Academic Intervention Services (AIS) are defined as “services designed to help students achieve the learning standards in English language arts...The intensity of such services may vary, but must be designed to respond to student needs as indicated through State assessments results” (p. 4).

Response to Intervention (RTI) approaches have recently been added as an option for AIS service in New York State (NYSED, 2010). The framework relies on three tiers of intervention as well as both formative and summative assessment. Tier 1 students receive research based instruction and reading progress is measured. Students who fall below an acceptable level of performance then move into Tier 2 interventions. Non responders to those interventions would then move onto even higher levels of intervention (Tier 3). Students who persistently fail to respond to interventions are categorized as non responders and special education classifications are then considered (NYSED, 2010). Students receive explicit strategy instruction at all levels but the intensity increases as students move up the RTI pyramid.

RTI can be a useful tool a variety of levels; however, it requires a significant shift in the typical practices of middle schools. While the state seems to have been heading this way for a number of years (The AIS model is framed upon such a system), districts will have to rethink many of the practices and policies currently in place. Based on this framework, I wondered how ready our current ELA staff was to implement AIS under this new intervention system. I questioned teachers regarding their perceptions of their current AIS practices, recent professional development, and district and building

administration's leadership. To develop an understanding of their perceptions, I administered a questionnaire to all of the teachers in the ELA department and any Special Education teachers responsible for ELA instruction. I then interviewed key responders to gain a deeper understanding of their current practices and recent professional development. I also wanted more information about their perceptions of district and building administration's leadership. Additionally, I videotaped a department meeting focused on new curricular materials for AIS delivery. Teacher responses demonstrate three priorities which should be addressed. First, teachers need time and space to learn from each other to improve instruction at tiers 1 and 2. Second, administration needs to look at the schedule and staffing to better group students. Finally, a clear vision needs to be developed and communicated to maximize fidelity of implementation. Overall, the school has many assets which can positively impact the RTI framework.

Theoretical Framework

Oral and literate ability are often used as indicators of general intelligence. While judgments based on race are now seen as misguided appropriations of stereotypes and generalizations, judgments based on a person's perceived oral or literate class (made by observing variations from the mainstream way of speaking, reading, writing, etc.) are still used to withhold privilege and status. In other words, judging a person based upon perceived oral or literate ability is one of the last acceptable ways of categorizing people as members or nonmembers of society. Literacy "has come to be associated with crude and often ethnocentric stereotypes of 'other cultures' and represents a way of perpetuating the notion of a 'great divide' between 'modern' and 'traditional' societies that is less acceptable when expressed in other terms" (Street, 1993, p. 430). If a person's language use does not reflect the values, norms, and

practices of the mainstream, they are considered inferior and lacking in intelligence and ability. This judgment is then used among mainstream America to explain a person's lack of material success: people fail to achieve upward mobility, not because of societal and institutional flaws, but because they do not have the same natural ability or intelligence (as reflected in their literacy and oral performances) as those who have achieved. In fact, many students may fail to learn and display mainstream language or literacy practices and will be seen as unintelligent or inferior because the atmosphere in which they are taught is not compatible with the original atmosphere in which students have developed these oral and literate behaviors. Therefore, an intervention framework would be a necessary component of a student's literacy education if only to help that student adopt more mainstream literacy practices. Students would be able to adopt these literacy practices and demonstrate mastery of them on state assessments through the improvement of the classroom environment, the intervention environment or a combination of both.

Standardized tests have been developed as a way of testing language and literacy ability to ensure that all students have opportunities to achieve socioeconomic equality. Patterns of language use valued by schools are generally reflective of the dominant, white, middle-class culture and Discourse (Gee, 1989; Heath, 1982a; Meier, 2003). Gee (1989) uses the term "Discourse" to refer to the identities that people claim, either consciously or subconsciously as a result of membership in these cultures. As a child, an individual is born into a Discourse community. He gradually becomes a more able participant in the community, but at every point of his development he is accepted by the community despite errors he may make as he acquires the values, dispositions, and behaviors of his home Discourse community. This period is the only time that a person is accepted as a member of a Discourse community without full mastery of the Discourse. Gee calls this home Discourse community the Primary Discourse.

Shirley Brice Heath (1982a, 1982b) found that the primary Discourse acquired may impact a person's academic performance as they attempt to become literate in a secondary Discourse (school). She found that children experienced difficulty because the new Discourse of school was either not compatible with the primary Discourse, or worse, was in direct contradiction to the primary Discourse. School activities such as questioning, reading, and interacting are not universally defined. Instead, such practices are affected by the culture one lives in; the Discourse community of the child may view an activity such as reading quite differently than the school Discourse community does.

Thus, students whose language development occurred within this dominant culture are prepared for the specific literacy demands of the school culture, while students whose development occurred outside of this community, must adapt to meet the demands of the same school culture. This reality results in a disparate level of performance on specific literacy tasks such as standardized tests. Students who have not been exposed to schooled literacy practices appear to be less able or intelligent and are placed in different settings such as AIS to address these deficits. In fact, these students are simply not practiced in the literacy activities of school; therefore, AIS may be needed to assist students to adopt these literacy behaviors but not to remedy any "deficits" per se. The framework of RTI would allow these literacy needs to be addressed without necessarily seeing the child as deficient.

Another complicating factor in the study of adolescent language and literacy is the number of content areas students encounter during the school day. Each of these areas may represent a different Discourse; for students who struggle to adopt the basic school-house literacies in the younger grades, the increasing number and complexities of secondary school Discourses may be more than they can reasonably navigate. Further, students who may not have

had to adopt new discourses to access elementary school language and literacy practices may not be able to adopt the language and literacy practices of specialized areas such as science or literature studies. Therefore, teachers of students at the higher grades may be dealing with a number of students who fail to demonstrate facility with their content area for a variety of reasons. Historically, schools have often looked to the student to explain lack of success by believing:

Whichever the deficit, the remedy is located in the individual child's remediation to make him fit the expectations and processes of schooling. In these ways, the process of schooling that enfranchise particular groups while disenfranchising others escape interrogation and are understood to be innocuous, impartial and beyond suspicion. The impetus is to reform the child rather than the curriculum, since the source of the trouble is seen to lie outside the parameters of 'schooling as usual'. (Alloway & Gilbert, 1997, p. 53).

Further, Kucer (2005) contends that schools have failed to recognize home literacies and acknowledge instruction as a possible (if not probable) cause of difficulties with literacy instruction.

The question, therefore, becomes: how do we create conditions to help our schools to "acknowledge, value, and build on" the literacy knowledge that children bring from their primary Discourse community in order to gain acceptance into the dominant culture while recognizing and respecting other Discourses? Fortunately, the concept of RTI may be a useful framework for incorporating a respect for a variety of ways of using language while allowing students spaces to experience apprenticeship opportunities in multiple Discourses including,

obviously, the dominant culture as represented by standardized tests. Because Tier 1 (meaning the general classroom environment) is the focus under an RTI framework and students' progress is monitored, it may be possible for institutions to begin to consider that there may be instructional issues that need to be addressed rather than assuming deficits exist only with the child. Differentiation is also an expectation at Tier 1, giving educators room to acknowledge multiple patterns of language use. Tier 2 environments would provide teachers opportunities to create workshop environments to apprentice students in the dominant Discourse and the specialized Discourses of secondary content areas. Most promising when considering the literature regarding multiple ways with words, is the replacement of the IQ-achievement discrepancy model which has been argued by some to provide little more than a label (Mceneaney, Lose & Schwartz, 2006) and has possibly allowed some institutions and classrooms to ignore the intelligences many students who are "not meeting standards" display.

Research Question

Students failing to meet standards on the state's measurement tool bring a variety of literacy skills and language uses into the classroom. The RTI framework can be used as both a method of acknowledging and adapting to students' multiple ways of using language and as a program endorsed by the New York State Education Department as a way of making necessary academic progress. However, adopting a RTI framework would require significant change on the part of institutions and individuals. Therefore, I considered one middle school's readiness to implement RTI by investigating three areas. First, what are the current AIS practices of this middle school? Second, what recent professional development opportunities have shaped or influenced these practices? Third, how have district and building administration supported and guided these practices? By looking at these three areas I was able to answer my main question

which was how does one middle school prepare for implementing the RTI framework and what additional steps do the ELA department and the district and building level administration need to take for successful implementation?

Literature Review

Response to Intervention: The Program and its Possibilities

Response to Intervention (RTI) is an academic construct theorized to identify and monitor at-risk students for the purposes of addressing reading weaknesses of all students through responsive teaching. Further, RTI also positions students' response to quality instruction or interventions as a test to determine special education classification (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). RTI is generally based on three or four tiers of intervention. The first tier is the general classroom environment and the highest tier is special education instruction based on low response to the less intense interventions at lower tiers (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Based on the model, all students are initially screened either using the previous year's scores or an early screening tool. Students deemed at-risk for reading issues are then frequently monitored for progress. Students are placed in Tier 2 interventions if they fail to make adequate progress in the Tier 1 environment which would cause them to not make end-of-year benchmarks. Students whose initial screening shows weakness and who do not grow at the expected rate even under the intense interventions of Tier 2 are given intervention at Tier 3. These students are considered "dually discrepant" and hard to remediate (Speece & Case, 2001).

There are two methods currently being used and studied for Tier 2 interventions. The first is the problem solving approach. This approach relies on the expertise of practitioners to analyze student performance and design interventions based on individual reading profiles. It is a recursive process. The second method is a standard treatment protocol. For some, this means a scripted approach. Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) contend that this standard treatment method eliminates the weakness of the previous approach in that it requires high levels of expertise (p. 95). The standard treatment model also helps to diminish the possibility that lack of student growth could be attributed to lack of appropriate instruction. Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) explain that researchers seem to prefer this method of intervention while practitioners seem to prefer a problem solving approach (p. 94).

There are several benefits argued to be associated with the use of RTI. First, Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) argue that RTI's dual discrepancy model for identifying students in need of intensive remediation is far superior to the previously endorsed IQ-achievement model (p. 96). Many have called the latter model a "wait to fail" system and criticize its lack of utility in achieving anything more than a label (New York State Union of Teachers, 2008). In contrast, the dual discrepancy model of RTI analyzes students' initial classroom performance and their rate of learning through frequent progress monitoring while they are receiving instruction or interventions (Stecker, Fuchs & Fuchs, 2008; Speece & Case, 2001). Through these checks students are screened in two separate ways, leading to higher numbers of true positives as opposed to high numbers of false negatives, a common criticism of the IQ-achievement discrepancy model (Speece & Case, 2001). Also, students

who are in need of the most intense interventions may be identified for more intensive services earlier in the process (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006).

Another touted benefit is the more even distribution of populations being identified as dually discrepant (or in need of learning disabled classification) based on the RTI model. Speece and Case (2001) found that students identified as dually discrepant closely mirrored the school population as a whole. Therefore, such a method of designating a learning disability could further the aims of social justice in that it avoids the overrepresentation of minorities and males that was present under the IQ-achievement discrepancy model of special education classification. Also, the lower number of students being classified as learning disabled could free up resources and reallocate them to improve learning experiences for all students (Fuchs & Fuchs 2006). The New York State Union of Teachers (2008) cites the rising cost of special education as a driving force behind the push to implement a more balanced approach with a difference of more than \$9,000 per student in New York State (p. 3). Clearly, it is important from a resources point-of-view to make sure resources are allocated where they can benefit the most people and improvement of educational opportunities for all students is an important goal in and of itself.

The third benefit attributed to the RTI framework relates to this redistribution of resources to impact all students. This third benefit is the emphasis on Tier 1 environments. The emphasis at Tier 1 is on quality, research-based instruction in the general education classroom (Case, Speece & Malloy, 2003). Theoretically, this emphasis implies that all

students would benefit from the RTI initiative because of increased attention and resources being directed at this most critical level. Stecker et al. (2008) said,

When a student fails to respond adequately to instruction, teachers need to be reasonably certain that their instructional practices did not contribute to the students' poor learning. Consequently, high quality instruction in general education becomes the first order of business when implementing RTI. (p. 10)

Key Components of Elementary Level RTI to Consider When Adapting for the Middle School Level

RTI is clearly a program with great potential to affect the learning outcomes of a large number of students at the elementary level. Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) stated "right now we most clearly see its promise in regards to how its multilayered structure can be implemented in the early grades" (p. 98). However, given its initial success at the elementary level, many school districts are looking to RTI to redefine their instructional practices at the secondary level (Johnson & Smith, 2011). However, RTI at the secondary level may not necessarily look the same as it does at the elementary level and key components of the model may need to be reconsidered (Fuchs, Fuchs & Compton (2010); Vaughn et al., 2010). Johnson and Smith (2008) state "although state agencies and practitioners conceptually embrace the RTI concept for older students as well, scant research and few, if any, RTI models appropriate for secondary school settings exist" (p. 46). They also suggest that there is a gap between research and practice about what works for secondary schools as systems looking to change. Therefore, it is important to

examine the elements of RTI at the elementary level and consider their characteristics at the secondary level in order to establish a vision for implementation at the secondary level.

One of the key ways middle school students differ in their instructional needs is based on the complexity of reading requirements at these levels. It is well understood that the students at higher grades must read to learn rather than simply learn to read (Johnson & Smith, 2008; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004). The emphasis on early literacy, *Reading First*, put forth the idea that once students can decode and read at a second grade level, the hard work is done. However, O'Connor et al. (2002) found that students in the higher grades could not comprehend what they read because their fluency was too low to understand grade level text. Biancarosa and Snow (2004) contend that literacy in the higher grades is more challenging than in the earlier grades because the literacies are more complex and because adolescents are not as motivated or interested. Clearly, reading instruction at the secondary level involves many more variables than may be recognized by some.

One of the variables frequently referred to when discussing adolescent reading instruction is lack of motivation and interest. Denton, Wexler, Vaughn and Bryan (2008) explained that students' off-task or disruptive behavior negatively affected their Tier 2 interventions. In a survey of school psychologists' perceptions of RTI and implementation, behavior and motivation were perceived as real barriers to implementation (Sansosti, Telzrow & Noltemeyer, 2010). Denton et al. (2008) also found that students in the low performing school where they studied the efficacy of Tier 2 interventions failed to attend school regularly. This lack of attendance could possibly be attributed to a lack of

motivation or interest. Therefore, it is critical that these factors are included in any RTI process implementation at the middle school level.

Middle school students need instruction that is individualized and responsive to their needs, abilities and interests in order to maximize motivation and interest. Biancarosa and Snow (2004) suggest that this instruction include self-directed learning, collaborative learning, and access to diverse texts. However, Parker (2010) found that this feeling of independence and individualizing for differing needs and desires was not experienced by adolescents. Instead, adolescents were subject to the same environments experienced in late elementary school. Research shows how important the relationship is between student developmental stage and classroom context (Parker (2010); Speece & Case (2001); Mallette, Schreiber, Caffey, Carpenter & Hunter (2009). While a classroom dominated by elementary type contexts may be appropriate for some of the late developers, early developers would feel a tension between teacher and student in this type of environment (Roeser & Eccles, 1998). Many of the studies lamenting the lack of adolescent motivation seem to understand that adolescents are not universally unmotivated but that motivation is a result of an appropriate matching between students and their learning environments. (Case et al., 2003) described the importance of a match between persona and classroom environment as a predictor of student growth in reading. Mallette et. al (2009) found that “literacy learning was intricately tied to the nature of the relationships in which that learning took place. In other words, growth in literacy seemed context specific and dependent” (p 181). The overarching and consistent theme seems to be that no single approach works for every student to increase motivation and interest with the goal of increasing literacy learning. Therefore, RTI interventions would have to

take individual needs into account. This would be difficult in a standard treatment protocol.

Another barrier to standard RTI implementation at the secondary level is the inflexibility of schedules and the specialization of teachers and classes. The psychologists questioned by Sansosti et al. (2010) and the researchers working in a low performing school in the Denton et al. (2008) study listed more inhibiting factors than facilitating factors in this area. The psychologists saw the scheduled, departmentalized and content-area based nature of secondary institutions as factors that needed to be overcome for RTI implementation to occur. Sansosti, Noltemeyer and Goss (2010), in a study of secondary principals verified that “scheduling and structural factors are major obstacles to the application of RTI within secondary settings” (p. 292). This was not merely a problem with student scheduling but was an issue with teacher schedules as well. These findings suggest that implementation of RTI would require significant changes to most secondary schools’ ways of operating. For example, Cheyenne Mountain Junior High School added four electives to their offerings in order to implement necessary tier 2 interventions (Johnson & Smith, 2011, p. 30). Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) described several studies with Tier 2 interventions: all of them had low teacher student ratios (three or less students per teacher) and a high number of sessions of at least thirty-five minutes each. Adding this number of classes or sessions with a low teacher/student ratio in order to address only one tier of RTI would place a large burden on schools which may already be struggling to deal with a lack of resources for even minimum state directives. Therefore, the complexity of scheduling and secondary school structures would have to be considered before adopting RTI in the secondary school.

An additional barrier unique to secondary school RTI efforts is the severity of reading difficulties experienced by students. School psychologists identified the size of the achievement gap as a barrier to the success of RTI at this level (Sansosti et al., 2010). Denton et al. (2008) and Fuchs et al. (2010) found that the needs of the middle school students required greater intervention than they were able to provide within the middle school setting. In speaking of their study and another (cf Kemple et. al 2008), Denton et al. (2008) found that extensive interventions at Tier 2 were ineffective “especially in terms of closing the gap relative to typically achieving peers” (p. 18). Further, they state that while students’ reading skills did not decline, their low level of growth may be an indicator that the goal of closing the achievement gap within one year may “be overly ambitious” (p. 16). Even more disheartening, Long, Mono, Harper, Knoblauch, and Murphy (2007) found that interest in a topic, a quality many adolescents fail to display, may not be enough to translate to learning for students with gaps. Students who did not have adequate knowledge in an area of interest were not able to utilize that interest to make progress in that area. Long et al. (2007) said, “essentially, interest’s energizing ability is fueled by knowledge acquisition, which was low in eighth grade...and plummeted in ninth grade” (p. 213). It seems that students’ inability to read to learn may contribute to lack of knowledge even in subjects they do find interesting. Therefore, it’s not just that students don’t want to learn, it’s that they can’t given lack of background knowledge. Middle school and high school professionals must be aware of the importance of ability to reading in almost all content areas and that lack of reading ability of any form may be severely debilitating to students when they are considering the scope and reach of any RTI program.

Another RTI element to consider is progress monitoring and the secondary level. According to Fuchs and Fuchs (2006), frequent progress monitoring comprises one of the most critical features of RTI. Through these measures of progress teachers and administrators can reflect upon the effectiveness of their instruction. This leads to informed decision making (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Stecker et al., 2008; Johnson & Smith, 2008, 2010; Deno et al., 2009) and better instruction. Instructors have useful data to share and consider as they design general classroom instruction. This facet of the Tier 1 environment is especially important when considering the Case et al. (2003) study of student growth. They found that persona (the student's academic and behavioral personality) and environment (the classroom dynamics) combined to predict students' ability to achieve reading growth. Therefore, frequent progress monitoring would allow a reflective and responsive practitioner to recognize and address issues at the classroom level in order to maximize individual student growth. Because teachers would be aware of student growth in previous classrooms, it would be more difficult for teachers to attribute lack of growth to student ability only.

Progress monitoring at the elementary level, while complex, becomes even more so at the secondary level. Under RTI, teachers and schools need to know where their students are as readers in order to provide them with appropriate interventions based on needs. Deno et al. (2009) studied Classroom Based Measurement (CBM) at the elementary level as a school-wide system and found several benefits to screening students with the same measure three times per year over multiple years. First, they found that teachers were more responsive (and effective). Second, they found that they could compare growth of populations across years (and thus the school effectiveness). Finally, they found that the

measure was valid and its utility and ease of use was high. However, progress monitoring may be much more difficult at higher levels. For example, Espin, Scierka, Skare and Halverson (1999) found that progress monitoring through CBM at the secondary level was possible but that the measures needed to be complex, thus, affecting the feasibility and sustainability of their use. Secondary principals saw the progress monitoring of RTI as important but they again noted their lack of availability and practicality at the secondary level (Sansosti et al., 2010, p. 292). Therefore, any implementation of RTI at the secondary level would have to include research into progress monitoring tools that could be introduced into that specific context.

RTI in the Middle School: Adaptations

Several adaptations to the model are suggested by RTI experts as recognition of the unique needs of secondary institutions and to address concerns about the specific literacy learning demands of adolescents. For instance, Fuchs et al. (2010) in *Rethinking response to intervention* suggests that at secondary levels:

1. Students may not need to be initially screened but that more data could be gathered to effectively group students for interventions.
2. Students who are severely discrepant could be moved to tier 3 immediately to mitigate and acknowledge the negative effects of factors such as low motivation and self-confidence which would exacerbate their already low performance.
3. Intervention needs to recognize that “adolescents require different instructional emphases and strategies” and that “innovation is required to address the academic

needs of adolescents with serious, accumulated deficits across a range of subcomponent skills within any given academic domain. (Fuchs et al., 2010, p. 25)

Vaughn et al. (2010) suggested that middle school interventions at Tier 2 may not be worth the effort given the small effect of their efforts. Fuchs et al. (2010) also suggests that instead of seeing RTI as increasing the intensity of interventions as students fail to respond, educators should see their focus as reducing academic deficits that already exist and work on moving students from higher tiers rather than focusing on a prevention model.

However, Brozo (2009) sees RTI as continuing its preventative nature with focus on the mitigation of risk for all students at Tier 1 but sees this as its weakest link when considering the “resistance by middle and high school [content area] teachers to incorporate responsive literacy practices into their daily lessons” (p. 280). While Fuchs et al. (2010) may see less of a need to screen for new cases of reading difficulty at the secondary level, Biancarosa and Snow (2006) disagree, arguing that students emerge as struggling readers when presented with increasingly specific contents and the need to master a variety of strategies to access this information. Further, the report cites the increasing literacy demands of our society. Therefore, it would seem that RTI becomes that much more complex at the secondary level: educators must move previously identified students (who may have extreme gaps to remediate) down the RTI pyramid while at the same time screening and providing interventions for previously successful students who find themselves floundering under the increasing demands of middle and high schools.

Interventions would obviously need to look different at the secondary level as well. Given that reading problems are heterogeneous and multidimensional in older students (Denton et al., 2008), teachers would need a high level of expertise to accommodate all of

their learners' needs in these tiers. Unfortunately, many studies suggest that most of these environments aren't designed with adolescents in mind. For instance, one of the things known about literacy learning is the need for explicit instruction in comprehension strategies (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006). As students are increasingly expected to read to learn as they move into middle school, the importance of specific strategy instruction as part of RTI seems clear. Unfortunately, Roe (2010) found that teachers often focused so much on a finished product that they were not able to promote the literacy or cooperative learning skills students should have been learning. She states, "to have product completion overshadow or substitute for an attention to strategy development leaves its development to chance" (p. 149). She advocates for the differentiation of instruction at the secondary level based on students' use and understanding of certain strategies in specific contexts. Chamberlain, Daniels, Madden and Slavin (2009) found that strategies were not taught as universal tools applicable in a variety of areas. Students were not given ideas as to where and how they could use the strategies in the future; therefore, the strategy could not be expanded to be used in content areas where middle school students would most need those tools to help them access the ever-increasingly complex readings. Students were given the ideas that these strategies were only of utility on state assessments. Keer and Vanderlinde (2010) contend that this regular teacher pattern, where explicit strategy and metacognition instruction is the exception rather than the rule, is one of the contributing factors to students' failure to meet comprehension benchmarks. Kun Lai, McNaughton, Amituanai-Toloo, Turner and Hsiao (2009) stressed the importance of avoiding making strategies the focus of instruction on a stand-alone basis. Further, students become passive recipients of literacy knowledge rather than active literate learners. Passive literacy learning at the

middle and high school levels is exactly what educators don't want. There is a contradiction between actual classroom reality and the research about what makes a difference in adolescent students' literacy learning. Studies about intervention at the higher levels suggest that students need even more explicit teaching and opportunities to engage in interaction around a text (Biancarosa & Snow, 2004); however classrooms are too often traditional, not student-centered and lacking in strategy instruction.

Teachers need to explicitly teach the strategies used by effective readers but the lesson also needs to be communicated that the strategies are tools of a larger purpose. Teaching strategies in this practical way would require that middle schools seriously reconsider literacy learning as the domain of the English or Reading teacher only. With the above-mentioned reluctance of some teachers to consider it a major component of their curriculum, this change may be one of the most difficult ones to make when adopting RTI. Understanding the complexity of adolescent reading, many districts are turning to scripted programs to solve their problems based on the standard protocol approach of RTI. Chamberlain et al. (2009) in an evaluation of a standard protocol *Reading Edge* program found that students' use of strategies based on explicit teaching remained in the mechanical stage. Students used strategies successfully in controlled contexts and even increased their reading scores at a limited rate over their peers; however, they were not able to transfer this strategy use to other contexts as needed. According to O'Connor (2002) "teachers failed to take advantage of 'teachable moments'" and, "there was no discussion about...why this was a helpful practice, or why Josh chose this particular strategy" (p. 14).

Programs can only go so far. What you are left with many times are teachers (who because they are not being trained as money to do so may be allocated to purchasing programs) don't know how to support meaningful literacy learning or teachers who do know better but who can't use what they know. For example, Donalson (2009) found tensions between students, teachers and administration in a Title I reading class. Control in this classroom was removed from both the student and the teacher when the teacher was mandated to use a scripted reading program resulting in poor instruction. Students who were already disadvantaged were further disadvantaged by losing the opportunity to increase their literacy skills at the same time they lost the opportunity to take elective classes. McDaniel, Duchain and Jolivette (2010) found that scripted programs did not allow for fluid movement through levels that would be necessary to keep students learning at their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1962) and that is intrinsic to the very nature of RTI. The teacher in the Donalson (2009) study expressed her frustration at the limitations placed upon through the mandated program. She was forced to read specific basal texts which were too easy for students. This mismatch between student ability levels and classroom texts clearly demonstrates that students were not being taught effectively based on current research on best practices. While some students appreciated the ease and structure associated with the scripted program, learning was not contextualized. This lack of contextualized learning suggests that students were not learning in meaningful ways. Mceneaney et al. (2006) in a synthesis of transactional reading theory as applied to RTI, contend that reading is a variable practice and that scripted programs or the standard protocols implemented with fidelity fail to take contexts into account.

The other fear with packaged literacy interventions is that they may not be appropriate for the middle school audience. Evans-Andris and Usui (2008) noted the use of a model intended for elementary school and discussed the negative effects of the mismatch. The program could not meet the needs of their middle school students. They review the issues facing many schools such as high-poverty, stating, “developing effective strategies of implementation that meet the needs of educators in high risk, low performing schools represents a challenge that model providers need to address head-on” (p. 65). They also discussed the implications of the loss of funding from time-specific grants such as the one evaluated in their study. It would seem that in many ways, unless a program can be implemented and sustained, it may actually be a waste of money. This waste of resources leaves students worse off than before the implementation of the program; in the Donalson (2010) study the teacher was able to implement literacy interventions with success but was forced to adopt a program which resulted in less literacy learning. It seems then that administrators need to make sure they recognize the expertise that does exist and use it rather than assume that because some can’t implement literacy interventions at an individualized level, all can’t.

Professional Development to Foster Effective Implementation of RTI

Whether or not scripted programs are used, teachers still need appropriate professional development at all levels to ensure that interventions are implemented with fidelity and that they are effective. For instance, Patterson (2010) found that lack of proper communication and time for implementation of a literacy course caused teachers to teach the course in limited and ineffective ways. Had they been properly developed prior to its

roll-out, the effects may have been different. Gallant (2010) found data to support the rule that expert teachers are able to notice more about a child's reading behaviors than novice teachers. The study compared pre-service and current intervention teachers, finding that the pre-service teachers responses privileged reading rules which had not yet been learned, while the current teachers analyzed responses as being intelligent errors. Clearly, professional development is crucial if teachers are to develop their own understandings about the nature and acquisition of literacy. More expert teachers would almost certainly see more than novice teachers. Many of the scripted programs ignore that there would be a difference in instruction based on a teacher's experience.

Patterson (2010) stresses the importance of teachers viewing themselves as literacy instructors, "professional development that helps teachers add literacy instructor to their repertoire of identities as English and Language Arts teachers has the potential to effect instructional change" (p. 243). While the positive effects of professional development may not always be immediately quantifiable, it is important to know what types of knowledge teachers use in strategic ways resulting in literacy learning (Gallant & Schwartz, 2010). Teachers should also have the opportunity to view examples of excellent teaching and exchange ideas if they are to see themselves as critical to the process of creating and sustaining growth in student literacy achievement (Patterson, 2010).

The study of teachers at varying levels in their career undertaken by Gallant & Schwartz (2010) found a pattern of teacher inability to integrate research based methods and structures into their classrooms. This gap in implementation causes a lower level of literacy growth. Therefore, opportunities exist for districts to educate their teaching

professionals and maintain the philosophy that a teacher's learning is never done.

Paterson (2010) stated the importance of building level leadership's integration into the process. They claim this integration is key in order to create the responsiveness needed to make a difference for students experiencing literacy challenges. Without this integration, there can be no community of teachers as learners and reflective practitioners. As outlined in NYSED (2010),

A school district shall take appropriate steps to ensure that staff has the knowledge and skills necessary to implement a response to intervention program and that such program is implemented consistent with the specific structure and components of the RTI process selected by the school district. (p. 42 )

From this, New York school districts can clearly see that the professional development of teachers is a top priority in the effort to promote literacy skills of students. However, many schools may not have a framework in place for meaningful professional development with opportunities for observation and reflection. Teachers very often remain isolated and professional development is not a main priority (Roe, 2010). Ron Sofo (2008) sees this as a matter of changing systems, not just working harder:

NCLB assumes that educators must work harder within the current K-12 education system to enable all students to achieve academic success. Yet, expecting educators to work more effectively within the current system to "leave no child behind" is like asking potential astronauts to use a Model T Ford to carry passengers to the moon. The possibility of reaching the moon in a Model T or fulfilling the vision of NCLB is

not only affected by the talent and skills of available personnel but also by the tools - including systems - with which they have to work. (p. 406).

The Patterson (2010) study of urban literacy program reform also found that those with the knowledge to make the implementation successful did not have the authority to make decisions which would have led to more success. This resulted in a program which led to more problems than solutions. While the program itself may have been sound, the implementation was troubled from the start. Therefore, Patterson recommends making sure all stakeholders have a shared vision for what they hope to accomplish with any change that is initiated.

Method

Context

Research for this study took place at one of four middle schools in a large suburban school district in Western New York. According to the NYS District Report Card for the 2009-2010 school year, 57% of students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. The population is made up of approximately 707 students, 3% of those students being classified as limited English speakers. The racial and ethnic makeup is 16% African American, 10% Latino, 3% Asian and 71% white. The attendance rate was listed as 94% and there were 124 suspensions throughout the year. The average class size is 22 students per teacher and 100% of teachers are categorized as “highly qualified.”

In the building, there are varying levels of instruction available to students needing extra reading and writing support. Classrooms are being pushed towards a balanced

literacy framework that the district has been implementing for the past two years. These classrooms focus on leveled reading and targeted small group instruction; however, implementation varies among classrooms. All students were measured four times over the year to assess their reading level based upon the Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI). Each grade level also delivers smaller, more intensive instruction through “core extension.” These classes are for students identified by state cutoff scores as needing academic intervention based upon previous year’s test scores in ELA. There are also students in core extension who are not identified by the state but who are “at-risk” based upon the small margin between their scores and the cutoff. Instruction is provided by ELA teachers and there is no set curriculum. The third and most intensive level of instruction is provided by the reading specialists. The reading specialists identify specific students based upon their low test scores and schedule them for extra support. Students may also be placed in support if an instructional team recommends the placement. Students in reading support are given the Qualitative Reading Inventory (QRI) to assess their strengths and weakness and design an intervention plan.

This research took place among the English and Reading departments and among the Special Education department of self-contained teachers. The English staff is made up of 2 6th grade teachers, 2 7th grade teachers, 1 7th/8th grade teacher and 2 8th grade teachers at varying levels of their careers. There are two Reading teachers in the department, one of whom splits her time as a literacy coach as well. There is also a district literacy coach and a literacy coach from an outside agency. Special Education teachers split across departments.

Participants

The participants in the study were representative of the sixth through eighth grade English Language Arts department at the middle school studied. I also gathered data from the Literacy Coaches in the building, the Special Education self-contained teacher for the eighth grade, and the English for speakers of other languages were participants in our department meeting; however, I did not ask them to complete a questionnaire because they do not provide AIS to the population at large, and their students have unique learning needs which may have influenced the findings inappropriately. There are three sixth-grade teachers in the building. One did not complete the consent to participate and was not present at the department meeting. The second sixth grade teacher has been teaching in the district for less than ten years and is elementary certified. This year was her first year returning to the building after a few years spent teaching at the elementary level. She is responsible for teaching ELA and for providing AIS for her students deemed at-risk based on last year's state test scores in ELA. The third ELA teacher splits her time between ELA and Social Studies. She is elementary certified and literacy certified for birth through sixth grade. She spent six years teaching in the elementary school and has been in her current position for four years.

There are two full-time seventh-grade ELA teachers in the building. The first has been teaching at this middle school for seven years. She has a pre-k through sixth grade professional certification, a seventh through eighth grade extension in ELA and is certified for literacy birth through twelfth grade. She is also the department leader. She teaches four classes of ELA and provides AIS for the students on her team. The second seventh

grade teacher has been teaching in the district for two years and is untenured. She is certified to teach ELA in grades five through twelve and is certified in Special Education and Literacy as well. She has the same teaching load as the other seventh grade teacher. She also has experience teaching special education in the self-contained classroom at the elementary level and was also a special education provider in an integrated co-teaching model at another district at the elementary level.

There is a third ELA teacher who is responsible for seventh grade but who also has two sections of eighth grade. She has been working for three years in the building and is certified in ELA in grades seven through twelve. She is also responsible for the AIS for the students on her team. Her schedule is much more complex than the other teachers in the building and she has less planning time than most of the other ELA teachers because of this.

There are two other eighth grade ELA teachers. I am one of them, and the other has been teaching in the building for over twenty years. She has her certification in ELA and her Master's degree is in English Literature. She, like myself, has four classes of ELA to teach and is responsible for providing AIS for the students on her team.

I also questioned the self-contained eighth grade teacher. She has taught for twenty-four years and has been with the district for twenty years. She is certified in Special Education and reading for kindergarten through grade twelve and is certified to teach elementary grades kindergarten through six as well. She teaches a seventh and eighth grade 15:1:1 class and spends the rest of the day providing AIS to students throughout the building who do not have other providers. She is also one of the Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems (PBIS) coaches for the building.

Because this was a study of a literacy initiative, the input of the literacy coaches and reading specialists from the building was a critical component of my research. The first literacy coach has been teaching for more than twenty years. She has experience as a Special Education teacher and an English Language Arts teacher. She was assigned to coach the eighth grade teachers this year; however, much of her time this year was spent “covering” the ELA classes of one of the other participants while she was out on leave. Therefore, this year she was filling two roles in the building even though there was a substitute hired to fill in as the literacy coach at this time.

The second literacy coach is also a reading specialist in the building. As the reading specialist, she is responsible for providing push-in support for the seventh grade teachers and also provides pull-out support at different grade levels based on student need. She was also responsible this year for coaching the seventh grade English Language Arts teachers. She has less than ten years of teaching experience and is certified in literacy for sixth through twelfth grade, elementary certified and has her extension to teach high school English. She taught kindergarten before working in this district and was a sixth-grade teacher in the building before becoming the reading specialist. The other reading specialist for the building was unavailable during the time the research took place.

Researcher Stance

I am currently a graduate student at St. John Fisher College working towards a Masters Degree in Literacy Education, 6-12th grade. I have a Bachelors degree in Political Science and International Studies and a Bachelors degree in English and Adolescent

Education. I am certified to teach English Language Arts in grades 7-12. As a researcher in this building, I will be an Active Observer (Mills, 2011) as I participated in the professional development focused department meeting. As an active observer I was able to experience the session I was studying. Therefore, I have the benefit of added perspective when considering my observations. A limitation of being an active participant is that it may be difficult to objectively examine the data from this portion of my research.

Method

My study focused on teacher's perceived preparation to implement an RTI approach for addressing the reading needs of students in the building. To gather data for this study, I observed one department meeting focused on implementing targeted small group instruction in the core extension (AIS) classroom. As I was a participant in this meeting, I video recorded it to examine teacher responsiveness to the instruction. I also administered one questionnaire to AIS providers in the ELA department to determine their readiness and willingness to implement targeted instruction and to get an idea about their "sense making" (Patterson, 2010) of the defined program. Based on gathered data, I followed up with semi-structured interviews to gather data pertaining to broad themes which developed. The interviews were semi-structured in that I had specific questions I asked; however, the questions were open-ended and responses varied. Therefore, the interviews were not identical from one interview to another. Further, because I am an active participant in the context I studied, respondents may have felt our interviews were more conversational. This may have affected their openness.

Quality and Credibility of Research

To ensure the credibility and quality of research and maximize its potential impact, I checked my research for credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Ensuring credibility requires that I “take into account the complexities...and deal with the patterns that are not easily explained” (Mills, 2011, p. 104). I accomplished this by checking my results with study participants and by being a long-time participant in the study context. I also triangulated my data by using questionnaires, interviews and observation to inform my findings. To address the need for transferability, I accurately and thoroughly described the study context and collected a variety of detailed data. As this qualitative research is “context bound” (Mills, 2011, p. 104), this detailed description was critical. To guarantee that gathered data was dependable, I used three sources of information and thoroughly documented the research practices and procedures. According to Mills (2011), these two methods allow gathered data to show stability. Finally, I allowed for confirmability, or the neutrality and objectivity of data (Mills) again through the use of triangulation. I compared data collected through one source of information to data collected through a different source. I also referred back to my original research question to guarantee that data was being analyzed in the appropriate manner.

Informed Consent and Protecting the Rights of the Participants

Before beginning my research, I obtained informed consent from my participant teacher colleagues and my current school principal. I provided consent forms to each of my participants. While the consent forms describe the purpose of the study and their right to not participate, I also made sure to verbally remind them of these important facts. I also assured them that I would keep their responses confidential through the use of numbers

and pseudonyms. Furthermore, I allowed them to check the analyzed data for inaccuracies or unintended messages after I completed the data collection.

Data Collection

The triangulation of data was achieved through the use of questionnaires, interviews, and observation. I administered a questionnaire based on a 5-point likert scale. Participants were able to easily complete the questionnaire allowing a high return rate on the questionnaires. Based upon themes revealed by the questionnaires, I interviewed several teachers as well as the reading teachers and literacy coaches in the building. Finally, I observed a department meeting focused on professional development. I recorded this session and looked for the broad themes in the teacher talk around the curriculum.

Findings and Discussion

As I considered the school's readiness to implement RTI, three major themes developed as I reviewed the data. First, the importance of placing teachers as learners and mentors in order to best use assets already in place. A second theme which developed was the existence of barriers outside of teachers' locus of control which must be minimized in order to maximize RTI implementation and the effectiveness of teachers. Finally, the lack of clarity of expectations for curriculum in both tiers 1 and 2 and for progress monitoring prevents teachers from growing professionally and positively impacting the intervention environments. For the purposes of this discussion, I will use the terms tier 1 and ELA class interchangeably and I will also use the terms tier 2 and AIS interchangeably.

Teachers as Learners and Coaches to Increase Intervention Effectiveness

One of the themes that emerged from my data was a need to focus on intervention providers. Much of the effort towards improving AIS has been focused on finding the perfect intervention program for our students or some package which will help teachers. For example, the department meeting I videotaped was based on a set of instructional materials, purchased by the vice principal in charge of ELA, to help implement AIS. However, one apparent area of focus is the need to build capacity in the teaching staff to maximize interventions at tiers one and two.

A simple cursory look at the data reveals that one of our strengths is the knowledge and experience of our staff and the data in Table A supports this finding  noted earlier, many teachers have significant experience and are certified in multiple areas. Even those teachers who have been teaching for less time have a variety of experiences and certifications.

TABLE A 			
Results of Questionnaire given on June 21, 2011 which indicate that teachers believe they have the knowledge to implement AIS effectively. (responses on a 5 point likert scale 5=strongly agree, 1=strongly disagree)	Mean (\bar{x})	Median (Mdn)	Mode
Question			
1. I am knowledgeable about the process for placing and grouping students in AIS for this building	4.2	5	5
2. I am knowledgeable about New York State’s suggestions and mandates for AIS grouping and instruction	3.8	4	na
5. The instruction I provide in AIS is effective and based on best practices and research.	4.1	4	4

6. I am adequately prepared as a professional to provide AIS.	4	4	4
7. I need professional development to help me better implement AIS.	3.7	4	4
8. I am knowledgeable about best practices and research in the area of AIS.	3.6	4	4
9. I frequently progress monitor in AIS.	3.9	4	na
10. I use the data from progress monitoring to move students based on their growth or needs.	4.3	4	na
I am familiar with RTI.	2.9	3.5	4
I am able to administer AIS based on a RTI model.	2.7	3	na

Furthermore, many of the teachers have received initial training in a variety of programs. While this aspect of their experience may seem like a negative, it could allow for each teacher to craft intervention environments which may be better suited to their styles than any one-size-fits-all approach. Also, knowledge could be shared inside the building in order to maximize the effectiveness of teachers. In fact, a desire for sharing and learning is one area which consistently came up during interviews. All three ELA teachers I interviewed spoke about wanting to see someone else implementing AIS. Ms. Folsen said she wanted to work with another teacher next year because “we are both doing the same thing and we can change together” (personal interview, June 23, 2011). Mrs. Eker said, “I would really like to meet with people who are good at it and share some of their ideas” (personal interview, June 23, 2011) and Ms. Sevor said “I would find it much more viable

to maybe do webinars or something where I get to watch other people teach” (personal interview, June 24, 2011).

As a whole, the staff questioned was generally neutral (mean of 3.7 out of 5) about a need for professional development (see Table A) and almost all of the interviewees spoke negatively about recent experiences with professional development initiatives. For instance, Mrs. Eker said, “I don’t need professional development...if you are talking about one of those district five-hour professional development sessions, please no” (personal interview, June 23, 2011). Much of the professional development teachers spoke about was an initial introduction to a variety of programs which was often not followed through on. Ms. Bee spoke of teachers responding negatively to this professional development because of the lack of follow up and commitment to helping teachers implement new programs in their classrooms. She said “we told the...coaches at the time along with the district people who were running that, we said that was a complete flop” (personal interview, June 24, 2011). As the research about RTI points out, fidelity of implementation of any intervention is crucial to the success of RTI (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Therefore, follow up to any training would be a critical component of RTI and currently that is not happening. Mrs. Eker said, “so we hurry up and do it and we don’t do anything with it, like the Better Answers we were on a good path last year and this year it kind of got dropped” (personal interview, June 23, 2011). According to one of the literacy coaches, “you need to build capacity in people who have some kind of foundation” and not treat every teacher as if they will benefit equally and fully from the same “two day training” (personal interview, June 24, 2011). From the interviews, it was clear that teachers wanted professional development which focused less on being talked to and which instead provided more of an

opportunity to talk with other professionals who have implemented or are implementing appropriate interventions. This data supports the findings of Roe (2010) that suggested teachers remained isolated and the teacher's desire for more collegial learning reflects the Patterson (2010) study's emphasis on teachers viewing themselves as active learners to increase literacy learning. Gallant and Schwartz (2010) also support the need to increase teacher expertise.

It seems that many teachers feel pushed in certain directions and therefore, would like more collegial learning opportunities and less time spent in traditional professional development. For instance, Ms. Folsen said, "can I do running records? yes. Can I do guided reading? yes. I think I just need support from someone else...I know things; I don't know everything" (personal interview, June 23, 2011). Both she and Mrs. Eker indicated that they know what needs to happen in AIS but they simply need more help to make it happen. And, while some did mention materials, most saw this help as being of a collegial nature. Additionally, every mention of teacher-teacher relationships was positive. The interviewees mentioned special education providers, social studies teachers, reading specialists and literacy coaches all as helping to implement AIS (tier 2) or ELA (tier 1) more effectively. For example, Ms. Folsen spoke about changing her instruction based upon the feedback of her special education teacher. She stated that she felt that instruction was vastly improved because of the opportunity to receive feedback. She said "I would change it completely for next period because she'd be like that really didn't work...and I mean it [the feedback] worked. It was an awesome year" (personal interview, June 23, 2011). All this data indicates that teachers could mentor each other to improve interventions. As research (Patterson, 2020; Roe 2010; Gallant & Schwartz) has found, teachers need to

constantly reflect and develop their expertise to accomplish this goal. Biancarosa and Snow (2004) include teacher interdisciplinary teams “which meet regularly to discuss students and align instruction” (p. 4) as one of their elements of effective adolescent literacy programs. Therefore, developing a framework for teachers to share and reflect will be a key element to ensure a successful implementation of RTI.

The staff questionnaires and interviews also revealed a varied level of knowledge of RTI (Table A). The group was moderately unfamiliar with RTI (mean=2.9 out of 5) and was less confident about their ability to implement AIS under that model (mean=2.7 out of 5). These results demonstrate an additional area of focus for collegial learning. Because teachers listed a variety of weaknesses in their questionnaires, this learning would have to be both department and individually focused. The building does have knowledgeable literacy coaches to lead the individual learning. However, only one teacher listed “learner” on the questionnaire as one of their primary roles as an ELA teacher and AIS provider. This result could be interpreted as meaning that teachers are not seeing their own learning as primary in importance when focusing on improving instruction. While this may seem like a small detail, research has demonstrated the importance of reflective teaching and continual professional growth on effective instruction (Patterson, 2010; Gallant, 2010). Therefore, in order to most effectively implement RTI, a culture shift needs to occur in which teachers see themselves as learners. However, many of the teachers talked about too many expectations and a lack of focus and follow through. To truly get teachers to buy in to such a culture, time has to be provisioned for them to be engaged in learning, reflecting and sharing.

Barriers to Implementation of RTI Outside Teachers' Locus of Control

As I reviewed the data, significant barriers to RTI implementation presented themselves. Many of these barriers mirrored those addressed in the literature. A consistent barrier which was mentioned was the schedule. This finding is comparable to the findings of Sasosti et al. (2010a) and Sansosti et al. (2010b) whose respondents focused on schedule difficulties when predicting barriers to RTI implementation. Several iterations of intervention services were mentioned and many of them were stymied by schedule difficulties. Mrs. Apple mentioned the need to consider physical education requirements, split staff (which generally means specials and foreign language), and lunches as factors driving AIS down on the priority list for scheduling. She said "when it comes to creating an actual schedule things like split teachers and lunches are more of the logistical things they have to think about first" (personal interview, June 24, 2011). All of these things are outside the teachers' locus of control and complicate the intervention process. However, if RTI is to be implemented effectively, AIS must be higher on the priority list. Moving AIS to the top of the list would require a commitment by the district to eliminate as many of the barriers as possible.

The importance of scheduling also presents itself when one considers the "dumping" of several students into AIS groups because there was nowhere else to put them. Both Ms. Folsen and Mrs. Eker cited instances of this happening during the most recent instructional year. Mrs. Eker said, "It was a nice group and then one kid who is a behavioral problem was removed from second language and there was no place for him to go so he ended up dumped" (personal interview, June 23, 2011). Ms. Folsen told me about students who were

not appropriately placed in AIS, saying “they dropped out of band and there was nowhere else to slot them in except into core” (personal interview, June 23, 2011). Every interviewer mentioned a need for better grouping practices and the most frequent response to question number 4 on the questionnaire (the current building process for placing students in AIS is effective) was a 2 (somewhat disagree). When asked what they would like to change about AIS implementation, most responded that grouping practices were an area of need. However, the complexity of the schedule and the lack of common time for AIS instruction is a prohibitive factor to more needs-based grouping practices. Mrs. Apple mentioned a previous iteration of the schedule which allowed for more flexible grouping “it was silent sustained reading across the building...so we had flexible groups that met...depending on their need” (personal interview, June 24, 2011); unfortunately, this schedule had to be changed for the current schedule because of the increasing number of students requiring intervention. Also, Ms. Folsen explained that the students she provided AIS to also had Math needs “they were so low that we decided to just do half [reading]and half [math]” (personal interview, June 23, 2011). This dual need further limited the amount of time which could be spent on reading intervention (personal interview, June 23, 2011). Mrs. Apple explained that she often spoke to administration about the lack of time for AIS but administration is prevented from changing the schedule by a variety of factors as previously mentioned, “we give...feedback every year about how core extension is not enough time to service kids...[and] impact the severe needs that some of our kids have and every year she just says there’s other things that need to be considered when we are making the schedule” (personal interview, June 24, 2011). However, Ms. Bee described a schedule at another district which allowed for more time to service students because “we

put all the AIS sections during the same time so a kid could flex back and forth if they needed to and it worked really well” (personal interview, June 24, 2011). Therefore, a more effective schedule may be possible if decision makers are willing to think creatively. For RTI to work appropriately educators need options for where to place students and this can only come through a more flexible AIS time.

Another area of need that became clear upon analysis of the data is communication. The mean response to question number 3 on the questionnaire, as shown on Table B was a 2.9 and the most frequent response (mode) was 2. Several responders mentioned communication as an area of concern on the open-ended section of the questionnaire as well.

TABLE B 			
Results of Questionnaire given on June 21, 2011 which demonstrate areas of need. (responses on a 5 point likert scale 5=strongly agree, 1=strongly disagree)	Mean (\bar{x})	Median (Mdn)	Mode
3. Communication about AIS in this building is effective.	2.9	2	2
4. The current building process for placing students in AIS classrooms is effective.	2.6	2	2
11. I am familiar with RTI.	2.9	3.5	4
12. I am able to administer AIS based on a RTI model.	2.7	3	na

Further, poor communication was repeatedly cited in interviews. For example, Mrs. Apple stated that she did not feel that our current Instructional Support Team (IST) process is effective (and thus transferable to an effective RTI program) because she didn't think "communication is good enough for it to be a useful process...we [don't] meet often enough." She explained that cases which were brought to IST were not followed up on and that some professional service providers were not asked to be present because of lack of communication "unless an administrator calls and schedules it they don't know to should up" (personal interview, June 24, 2011). The implication was that IST may at times be more of a "going through the motions" exercise resulting in blanket approaches to individual student needs. Mrs. Apple also stated that some teams may simply deal with students rather than going through a complicated and frustrating IST process,

I think they think that if a student isn't being brought up that everything is fine when in reality the process is so daunting that many teams try to handle it amongst themselves and only bring it to IST when the student needs support beyond what they can handle or it's going to a CSE. (personal interview, June 24, 2011).

While these approaches may be the best we have available currently and would not do any child harm, the goal of RTI in its purest form is to individualize approaches to intervention based on thorough assessment of student need and input of all available service providers. Given the low responses in this area, RTI implementation would be negatively impacted by lack of communication and this element must be addressed. As the building already has an IST framework developed, this may be simply a case of having to refocus efforts and

standardize formal processes. As Johnson and Smith (2011 and 2008) indicate, the use of problem solving teams is critical to the success of the RTI tiers.

Another barrier which was found in the data is a perceived waste of resources- specifically staff that are being underutilized. Many special education teachers were described as being bogged down with organizing student work and AIS time was being used to help students with homework rather than used for interventions. Ms. Bee said,

I think that too many times it is getting [the student] to a product...this kid has to complete this essay or this kid is behind on their social studies notes and that's what the special ed teachers are doing but it's not really working on those skill areas or improving mastery at all. (personal interview, June 24, 2011).

If RTI is to be implemented effectively, special education teachers' expertise will need to be utilized for interventions, not for homework help. Roe (2010) found that this product focus prevented teachers from teaching reading effectively. Ms. Sevor suggested that there are other staff in the building who could be enlisted to help with non-reading issues. She said "they are taking this child and they are organizing their books, they are getting them on track with homework...following up with parent communication which really a TA could do or a buddy" (personal interview, June 24, 2011). Shifting of roles and responsibilities would ease some of the pressure on Special Education providers. The school has been assigning buddies as part of the Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) program. These buddies could free up the special education teachers' time to allow them to provide interventions. Also, the mindset could be changed that Special Education teachers should only be working with classified students. Mrs. Eker talked about not being able to provide

interventions to a student because he was not classified despite a belief on her part that his needs would have been better met in her group. She related the story, saying “I would have taken [student name omitted for confidentiality]...but he wasn’t special ed...so I wasn’t going to give him special ed services because he wasn’t mine” (personal interview, June 23, 2011). Instead, teachers could be matched with students who have needs or personas which would fit those teachers’ styles and knowledge. Case et al. (2003) noted the importance of matching to maximize student growth. Ms. Folsen described one social studies teacher’s willingness to teach writing and her background as an ELA teacher, “we already talked about we want to do texts sets so that the kids are reading in her room the same theme we are reading in ELA...she’s also an ELA teacher” (personal interview, June 23, 2011). Several other teachers are ELA certified but are teaching social studies as well. While the building may be unwilling to require those teachers to provide AIS as an ELA teacher, many of those teachers, and others may be willing to work on specific skills (writing for example) with specific sets of students. This shift could allow other teachers who are trained to teach reading to have more homogenous groups and allow the building more overall flexibility to match students and teachers more effectively. As grouping practices was one of the most frequently cited issues to the effective implementation of RTI, administrators would want to consider this option. Fuchs et al. (2010) saw effective grouping as an important part of screening data as middle school students may not need as much initial screening. Paterson (2010) stressed the importance of including all teachers in the process to increase literacy learning. Clearly, every teacher in the building needs to share what expertise they have with every student. Maintaining divisions between content areas and service providers prevents some students from receiving the help they need, as

indicated in Mrs. Eker's example above. Therefore, administrators need to redefine what is meant by special education and ensure that all staff are providing it with special education teachers providing direction and expertise. Additionally, all students should benefit from the wisdom of all teachers and more sharing of students should occur.

Lack of clarity about curriculum and expectations

The interview transcripts are riddled with references to a variety of initiatives, programs and expectations demonstrating a lack of clarity at all levels. Teachers and coaches mentioned smart goals, essential questions, O'Flahaven, better answers, bliss, portfolios, humanities approaches, SSR, and other programs. The videotaped department meeting was focused on another set of curricular materials. These results demonstrate a lack of focus on a few reasonable professional development goals. Also, many of the interviewees mentioned the new New York State Common Core standards which are currently being rolled out at the state level. Teachers lamented at the number of expectations and initiatives that the building or district have directed at ELA teachers. When I asked Ms. Sevor what she would need to better implement AIS, she emphatically replied "just less (pause) expectations. Every time I turn around they are throwing something new at us" (personal interview, June 24, 2011). As stated previously, Mrs. Eker discussed the number of programs that were started but not followed through on and Ms. Bee spoke about initial blanket trainings at the district level which were not well received because of lack of follow through or practical examples of implementation at the middle school level (personal interview, June 23, 2011; personal interview, June 24, 2011). The set of curricular materials that were presented at the videotaped department meeting (June

21, 2011) was rolled out in the same manner. While it may be a great resource, they are marketed for grades 3-6. Also, all 6th-8th grade ELA teachers received them meaning that if everyone was using them the teachers would probably repeat lessons with students unless a plan for record keeping was in place. Further, the Special Education providers did not receive the materials and were not involved in the meeting (or any of the other 90:90:90 staff developments throughout the year).

The lack of inclusion of the Special Education providers is an important oversight as it indicates a lack of clear vision about who will provide interventions and how they will be supported. This data shows that while the intentions may be to adequately prepare teachers to implement AIS, most teachers are receiving superficial training in a number of curricular methods. It is possible that limited budgets may prevent long-term professional development initiatives; however, as noted above, most teachers felt they would benefit from more time to collaborate with their colleagues and observe other teachers deliver AIS. Providing this time may be a relatively inexpensive way for the school to increase the effectiveness of tier 1 and tier 2 interventions, especially if administrators use current staff creatively.

The data also demonstrates a frustration with the number of focus areas the ELA department has. Ms. Folsen expressed her frustration with the lack of clarity about basic classroom expectations: "this year we were pulled in a million directions too because what I think is hard about ELA...is like you are grabbing at straws. We have no curriculum" (personal interview, June 23, 2011). When I asked Mrs. Apple if we are set up to be effective in the classroom, she responded negatively and attributed her response to the

amount of change and the lack of direction and communication about the change at all levels: building, district and state. She said,

I think we are in limbo...because what we had wasn't working, it was partially disbanded but not completely, there was a committee who tried to revise the requirements but again the communication about the roll out of that is not great and...people are...just doing whatever they want to do now. (personal interview, June 24, 2011).

While people may be doing whatever they want to do now, given the above mentioned responses, teachers seem to want a clear direction to take with fewer expectations in regards to programs they are expected to implement effectively. In fact, when asked what questions and concerns they have about AIS in the building, a majority of them listed a clear vision as lacking (teacher questionnaires, June 21, 2011).

Several respondents referred to the new Common Core Standards as a positive direction and Ms. Bee was hopeful as well; however, she stated

I think we will be in really good shape this year if what they say is supposed to happen really does happen we are going to be a lot better off. If it doesn't we are going to be in the same position we are every year: not knowing, everything a mystery, waiting for things to get unrolled as they come and I don't want to see teachers in November scrambling because they finally have the vision unrolled in these tiny increments. (personal interview, June 24, 2011).

Regardless of the perpetual optimism of teachers (they all discussed goals for themselves next year), teachers are unsure about what is expected of them and about what is available to them. This uncertainty would certainly be a barrier to implementation of RTI as lack of a clear direction may prevent teachers from understanding their role or committing to attempting new methods. Ms. Folsen said, "I think that's the biggest thing is people don't feel comfortable and there's no one really there supporting you so why would you do something and take that dive?" (personal interview, June 23, 2011). Attempting anything new in the classroom is a scary thought when a teacher doesn't know if she will be forced to change again in a year. Therefore, having a clear vision about what the crucial and expected elements of tier 1 and tier 2 interventions are will be an important step for an RTI framework. Developing a clear vision may be a complicated process given the lack of research on secondary interventions and the complexity of student needs at this level. Furthermore, the vision must be clear at all levels of administration to avoid the mixed messages many of the respondents spoke about in their interviews. Because there are two levels of administration working with ELA teachers, Reading Specialists and Literacy Coaches, there will have to be a shared vision at both levels to maximize clarity. Biancarosa and Snow (2004) and Patterson (2010) both emphasize the importance of this shared vision and solid understanding by leadership of curriculum and pedagogy.

Progress monitoring is also an area in need of clarity according to the data I gathered. Students receiving tier 3 interventions are frequently monitored for progress. However, students in the other tiers receive the SRI and as Mrs. Eker and Ms. Sevor noted, the SRI may be biased towards vocabulary. The building also uses Common Formative Assessments (CFA) to assess student strengths and weaknesses but, as Mrs. Apple noted,

there was no clear plan for those until late in the year and they are not as diagnostic as other tools. Clearly, developing teachers' ability to give and use progress monitoring tools is an area of need. Both literacy coaches demonstrate an ability to match teachers with the correct tool and to provide training; however, this needs to be an area of focus rather than one of many initiatives the coacher and teachers are trying to implement. Many of the teachers spoke about the Smart Goal Portfolio, a "workbook" developed by the reading specialist, as a possible tool for AIS but indicated that it needed to be pruned a bit as it took up more time than they felt comfortable with. Ms. Folsen said "we used it half the year but it's a lot of work. It is more than a five minute warm up...I just want to use it in a different way...like with my AIS next year" (personal interview, June 23, 2011; personal interview, June 24, 2011). However, it is a positive asset that the building can easily use to frame their work with AIS.

Overall, the data collected demonstrates middle school has a number of assets which they could capitalize on in order to increase the effectiveness of tiers 1 and 2. Teacher expertise and willingness to work together to change is a significant asset. Barriers also exist including the inflexibility of the schedule, lack of communication, and lack of a clear vision for curriculum, progress monitoring and pedagogy.

Implications

I set out to evaluate our school's readiness to implement an RTI framework by examining teacher perceptions of our ELA curriculum and our AIS program. While my research uncovered areas which would affect our school's implementation of RTI, many of them are outside of teachers' and even administrators' control. For this reason, it seems

more practical to focus first on areas which could be positively impacted by the school's staff.

First, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) should be developed which allow ELA teachers to increase their effectiveness in tiers 1 and 2. PLCs have been an expectation at the district level for several years and the school has been implementing them with some level of success. Thus, there is a solid foundation laid to make these meaningful. However, as I found, the lack of a clear vision of curriculum and expectations, as well as the limited amount of shared time to address issues (with no clear priorities), has not allowed teachers to effectively use these PLCs to improve their instruction. While some teachers may have benefited from the small number of sessions this year, as the results suggest, many teachers still exhibit a desire to spend time collaborating and reflecting with their peers. Therefore, shared teacher time is an area of need.

Administration would have to be creative in order to facilitate this time. For instance, instead of teachers administering their SRIs and CFAs, TAs or librarians could do this. Then teachers could use this time to observe other teachers and reflect together. Their time could also be spent investigating progress monitoring options as research (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Stecker et al., 2008; Johnson & Smith, 2008; Deno et al., 2009) has shown the importance of using these measures to place students and to plan meaningful instruction. As I found in my research, a matrix of progress monitoring tools was prepared by the reading specialists but was deemed too confusing. This matrix could be made available to those who could use it.

As Ms. Folsen stated, teachers don't know everything, but they do know quite a bit. To best make use of this wealth of expertise, teachers need to be able to share what they know and learn what they don't. Gallant & Schwartz (2010) found the importance of expertise in delivering interventions and other studies (Donalson, 2009; Evans-Andris & Usui; O'Connor, 2002) found that even scripted or packaged programs were less effective if teachers did not have opportunities to develop their expertise. Having colleagues who can help staff reflect on and improve their teaching may be worth far more than any program. Therefore, administration should see developing reflective teachers as their most important priority.

Another way the school could prepare for an RTI framework is to generate solutions to scheduling barriers to better group students for tier 2 interventions. This was an area of need according to teacher responses to the questionnaire and was consistent to research about the barriers unique to secondary schools (Sansosti et al., 2010; Johnson & Smith, 2011). While some elements are outside of administrators' control, a scheduling committee may be able to find creative ways to eliminate barriers. Such solutions should recognize the skills all teachers have and would be willing to share. For instance, students with writing needs could be placed in a team with a social studies teacher who enjoys and is able to teach writing. As research (Sansosti et al., 2010; Fuchs et al., 2010; Denton et al., 2008; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004) has demonstrated, students at the secondary level exhibit a wide variety of needs which could affect their performance on state tests. Relying on ELA teachers as the sole providers of interventions fails to recognize this variety and prevents students from being matched with staff who have expertise in meeting their unique needs. Instead, counselors, other content area teachers, teachers of electives and other

appropriate professionals should be expected and enabled to work with these students. My results have indicated that there are quite a few professionals who have demonstrated an interest and an ability to provide these interventions. Paterson (2010) advocates for the inclusion of all teachers into the process to improve literacy learning and make real change.

The IST process should also be refocused to better provide services to students. Communication about IST—what it is, how it works and information about specific students—should be provided to appropriate staff. Furthermore, administrators should reflect on the process and streamline it where possible. Sofu (2008) stresses the importance of reshaping these structures to enable teachers to make instructional changes and increase student progress. As mentioned by Ms. Folsen, Mrs. Eker and Mrs. Apple, the students brought to IST are those who are impacting the school's ability to make adequate yearly progress. Clearly, meeting these students' needs should be a priority and they should benefit from the expertise of the entire staff, not just one department.

Finally, to better facilitate the implementation of RTI, the school leadership needs to spend time developing a shared vision, not just for the ELA department, but for literacy learning across the content areas. They should consider what tier 1 and tier 2 environments should look like and how these can be supported. Also, they should consider where content area literacy instruction falls within the RTI framework. To the best of my knowledge this question has not been answered (or possibly even considered) by previous research and leaves an important area of secondary literacy unaddressed by RTI. As I see it, this will be the most difficult area to address for several reasons. First, the district ELA administrator does not, to my knowledge, have jurisdiction over other departments.

Therefore, the integration of expectations may be difficult among content areas, especially those not traditionally associated with literacy. Second, the state is currently unrolling a new curriculum which may not be fully understood at this stage. As more information becomes available, changes to tier 1 environments are inevitable. Last, a new superintendent (the fourth in six years) has just been hired and the assistant superintendent for curriculum has just retired. Thus, changes to instruction and curriculum will most likely be coming from that direction too. All of these factors make it difficult for building level leadership to develop a clear vision. However, as Paterson (2010) found, a clear vision and the integration of leadership into the process is a critical feature of successful instruction. Obviously, we need to know where we are going before we can get there.

Conclusions

Implementation of an RTI framework is not an easy task. It will require the school and the district to refocus and prioritize actions. As teachers demonstrated through their responses, a lack of clear vision and lack of time to spend time developing their instructional delivery with expert colleagues limits the effectiveness of their instruction. This limiting of teacher's ability to be effective will have to change if RTI is to be an initiative that supports meaningful change. The school and district will have to be focused about their expectations and will have to be responsive to needs that arise. They will also have to make sure that communication is effective to maximize the potential of any initiatives which are developed. Real focus is needed to prevent RTI from being another buzzword which effects little or no legitimate educational change.

There are several limitations to this research. Time was the most limiting factor. I completed this research during the last week of the school year and it was difficult to schedule time for interviews. I would have liked to have interviewed more teachers to make my interview data richer. I would also have like to have analyzed data from the questionnaires and the department meeting more thoroughly before interviewing individual teachers. Further, a staff-wide questionnaire would have been useful to develop an understanding of other departments' perceived assets and barriers. Additionally, the research would have benefited from an understanding of administration's attitudes and beliefs about RTI and our ability to implement it.

Research is still needed to examine how exactly RTI will function at the middle school level. Because of the complexity of student needs and teacher expertise, a one-size-fits-all approach may not be possible. This inability to reproduce contexts limits the universality of research; however, as the Biancarosa and Snow (2004) and the Fuchs, et al. (2010) reports demonstrate, broad guidelines can be developed. Furthermore, the use of different progress monitoring tools should be studied to better facilitate reflective teaching and effective grouping strategies as emphasized by Fuchs et al. (2010).

Overall, the research did accomplish what I wanted. I was able to develop an action plan for teachers as we struggle to improve our instruction as a department. The most promising results from this research are the willingness of the school's teachers to adapt to change and to continuously develop their expertise. With support, the teachers can ready themselves to effectively implement RTI interventions.

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Appendix A

Please fill out the following questionnaire based upon yourself and the current school year. Circle 1-5 with

1-strongly disagree **2**-somewhat disagree **3**-neither agree or disagree **4**-somewhat agree **5**-strongly agree

1. I am knowledgeable about the process for placing and grouping students in AIS for this building.

1 2 3 4 5

2. I am knowledgeable about New York State’s suggestions and mandates for AIS grouping and instruction.

1 2 3 4 5

3. Communication about AIS in this building is effective.

1 2 3 4 5

4. The current building process for placing students in AIS classrooms is effective.

1 2 3 4 5

5. The instruction I provide in AIS is effective and based on best practices and research.

1 2 3 4 5

6. I am adequately prepared as a professional to provide AIS.

1 2 3 4 5

7. I need professional development to help me better implement AIS.

1 2 3 4 5

8. I am knowledgeable about best practices and research in the area of AIS.

1 2 3 4 5

9. I frequently progress monitor in AIS.

1 2 3 4 5

10. I use the data from progress monitoring to move students based on their growth or needs.

1 2 3 4 5

11. I am familiar with RTI.

1 2 3 4 5

12. I am able to administer AIS based on a RTI model.

1 2 3 4 5