Response to Intervention: Implications for use when Identifying Students with Special Needs

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Abstract
Upon being registered in August of 2006, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) began requiring schools to think about the way in which they identify students with learning disabilities (SLD) and in many cases, then make changes to their systems of classification. Response to Intervention, or RTI, has emerged as a popular method for meeting the federal mandates. Combining high quality instruction, progress monitoring, and more specific supports based on students’ response to research-based teaching practices, RTI is becoming a common way to provide both instructional and behavioral interventions for students at risk, and determine if a child has a learning disability. This study reports on a survey done in a rural school that has begun to implement RTI. The study supports literature that discusses the need for training for all those involved in the RTI process. It also speaks of the need for education and support for teachers when providing interventions for students that struggle behaviorally.

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Response to Intervention: Implications for use when Identifying Students with Special Needs

by

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Abstract
Upon being registered in August of 2006, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) began requiring schools to think about the way in which they identify students with learning disabilities (SLD) and in many cases, then make changes to their systems of classification. Response to Intervention, or RTI, has emerged as a popular method for meeting the federal mandates. Combining high quality instruction, progress monitoring, and more specific supports based on students’ response to research-based teaching practices, RTI is becoming a common way to provide both instructional and behavioral interventions for students at risk, and determine if a child has a learning disability. This study reports on a survey done in a rural school that has begun to implement RTI. The study supports literature that discusses the need for training for all those involved in the RTI process. It also speaks of the need for education and support for teachers when providing interventions for students that struggle behaviorally.
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Upon being registered in August of 2006, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) began requiring schools to think about the way in which they identify students with learning disabilities (SLD) and in many cases, then make changes to their systems of classification. Response to Intervention, or RTI, has emerged as a popular method for meeting the federal mandates. Combining high quality instruction, progress monitoring, and more specific supports based on students’ response to research-based teaching practices, RTI is becoming a common way to provide both instructional and behavioral interventions for students at risk, and determine if a child has a learning disability.

Previously, a model that showed a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability, IQ, and achievement was used. When IDEIA was passed in 2004, schools became no longer required to use this type of model and were actually encouraged to use different methods to identify specific learning disabilities (Senate and House, 2004). Federal regulations leave much of the decision making about these processes up to the state education agencies. As a result of this, states have taken a wide array of approaches to meeting the requirements of the law.

The United States Department of Education stated on its website (2009) that they do not mandate or endorse any particular model for RTI. With this being said, the most popular RTI models found within RTI literature are based on a three-tiered type of intervention. This model outlines the different levels of support that are given to students based on their needs when learning the general curriculum offered to all students. This three tiered model has also been used as a way of outlining the different levels of support given to students who have behavioral issues. Support is given to students in varying intensity based on their response to the intervention put into place while in the given tier.
If students are not found to be successful in tier 1, they are then given additional support in tier 2. This tier allows for more individualized instructional or behavioral support. Students’ progress is then monitored throughout their time spent receiving tier 2 support. If a student is not making adequate progress to exit tier 2, he is then moved into tier 3 that involves much more concentrated support for the individual student. This is also where some schools may begin the process of officially referring a student for Special Education services.

Information regarding implementation of RTI is present in many different forms. Practical guides for teachers, internet sites, and face to face training are all examples of how those involved in the educational system can be educated about RTI. Researchers have also weighed in on how RTI should be implemented. In a study by Lynn Fuchs, (2003) validity of intervention methods and how they are examined was challenged. Fuchs raises issues of timing of responsiveness measurement. She suggests that students may show further growth than is shown in a final assessment at the end of the intervention period. It is suggested that students are measured along the process by plotting their progress on a slope to demonstrate possible growth. She also suggests that the method of outside intervention be carefully examined in relation to the general education interventions. Intensity and frequency of interventions can cause differences in responsiveness and affect how those interventions work over time.

In 2009, Bender, Berkeley, Peaster, and Saunders reported that states displayed a wide spectrum of methods for implementing RTI in schools. At the time of the study, only 15 states had adopted a model for RTI. These states have adopted either previously existing models or those that have been developed as a result of blending new ideas with existing models. Many states are in what is called the development phase. These states are mostly developing pilot programs to later implement within the various school districts. Some states are beginning the
process by first making sure that their teachers are receiving proper professional development. By doing this, they will then be able to provide the high quality instruction needed for RTI to be effective. Other states are simply providing guidance. The opinions of the states vary here. Some are suggesting that schools use statewide interventions prior to using a tiered RTI system. Others are mandating that districts or even individual school districts create their own plans for RTI. The variety of methods used to provide support to students is vast. Many individuals in the field have weighed in on the new direction of classifying students, demonstrating both the positives and negatives of the RTI process.

In 2008 the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) released its official position on RTI, in which it called for schools to be mindful of certain procedural steps and possible pitfalls of implementing RTI. The CEC recognized the importance of RTI for the educational support of all children in school. It also recognizes that the role of Special Education teachers can be greatly impacted by the effectiveness of this system in schools. The CEC declared that the effectiveness of RTI would be based on a school-wide teamwork attitude and appropriately allocated resources for teachers to make this new type of instruction happen for students. Researchers also support this thought. Examining the value of this type of identification has been a popular topic of research since the reauthorization of IDEIA in 2004.

Carpenter, Lambert and Werts (2009) completed a survey of special education directors in North Carolina to gauge perceptions of school employees about RTI. Opinions were mixed in this survey. School administrators stated that both general and special educators should be responsible for collecting data during the intervention process. This is a varying opinion from educators who believed that school psychologists and other related service personnel should be responsible for this. Varying opinions further demonstrate the possible change of the role of
special educators when RTI is implemented. This combined with the data from the 2009 Bender et al. study shows that schools seem to still be working toward systems that work. This data shows that although the new requirements are being taken seriously, schools still have discrepancies in protocol and who is responsible for delivery of services. Carpenter et al. also noted in their 2009 study that school employees surveyed expressed a need for a team approach when both collecting data and monitoring progress during the RTI process. This is just one component in the process of RTI implementation.

Various studies have been completed to show the benefits of the three-tiered approach on student achievement. Hickman, Linan-Thompson, and Vaughn (2003) completed a study in which they noted that Response to Instruction, another name for RTI, was an effective way of identifying students in need of additional reading support in the classroom. They state the importance of establishing criteria for success and like Fuchs (2003) believe a timeframe in which to examine student achievement of those criteria is essential. When these two prerequisites are in place, it makes it easy for schools to identify the students that are in need of support. Their study, in fact, clearly made evident that students were in need of supplemental support for reading because they did not meet the required criteria. Students in need of this extra support are often given more specific instruction based upon their needs.

Fulmer, Harty, and O’Connor (2005) conducted a study in which the students were offered additional support in tier 2 by participating in small group instruction 3 days a week in addition to their learning experiences in the general education classroom. In this study, the authors noticed that students that received support with tier 2 interventions were successful and at times even left tier 2 to return to receiving only general classroom instruction with built in supports. They also found that those students receiving support in tier 3 were often times those
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who qualified for Special Education services. These students were accurately placed in these programs which addressed their individuals learning needs. This process also resulted in a lower percentage of students (8%) that were identified with specific learning disabilities compared to previous methods (15%).

Gilbertson, VanDerHeyden, and Witt (2007) echoed the validity of using an initiative called System to Enhance Educational Performance (STEEP). STEEP mirrors the procedures of RTI and per the findings in the research, also demonstrated the effectiveness of a leveled intervention system paired with solid measurable benchmarks for monitoring student progress and performance. Referrals of students to receive Special Education services when STEEP was implemented decreased. While the research surrounding the effectiveness of RTI stands to tell educators the positives of this type of interventions, it is not without examining closely the processes that are used in its implementation. Case, Molloy, and Speece (2003) stated that RTI was an effective program for identifying students with reading disabilities.

The study by Case et al. (2003) provides insight into a three year study completed by monitoring the progress of elementary students showing difficulty with reading. In this study, it was found that students demonstrating difficulty with general curriculum reading instruction fell significantly behind their peers when no extra support was given to them within the classroom. Basic reading skills were tested by researchers in an effort to discover in what areas students were in need of support. By examining the discrepancies of these students over a long period of time and examining their response to interventions by classroom teachers, they concluded that non-responsive students were those in need of Special Education services. Other issues of behavior problems being tied to academic weakness, and motivation being a part of the instructional intervention were also noted in this study.
Research conducted before RTI became a phenomenon demonstrates how the important factor of motivation can determine effectiveness of an intervention. A study conducted in 1994 by Moore and Waguespack demonstrates how using tools to increase student motivation creates a greater response to interventions. The study found that students increased homework completion and overall academic achievement as a result of having the Mystery Motivator as a tool used in their classroom. Information gathered from this study could be used by researchers to investigate the effectiveness of interventions combined with the use of motivation tools like the one in the study.

Research has shown (Ardoin, Connell, Koenig & Witt, 2005) that RTI can also give educators a way of effectively problem solve and make decisions more easily about eligibility. In their study, Ardoin et al. showed how RTI was used as an effective way for determining baseline performance of students and then later used to help distinguish students by ability and provide services that address their learning gaps. This study did bring to light the importance of a possible problem; delayed identification. Researchers caution that some students may make it to upper levels in school without having any formal intervention to address their needs. This can be problematic when students are then missing basic skills needed to perform at the level of peers. It can also mean that students are being placed in groups needing higher level of supports not based on performance of current tasks, but rather lack of skills that were supposed to be learned previously.

Many of the studies surrounding RTI are done at the elementary level. This lack of literature about RTI implementation is not by accident. RTI policies tend to be put into place first within the context of reading instruction. Results of the study by Ardoin et al. (2005) can point to the reason why RTI is making its way so slowly to the upper levels. Revealing how
some students are making their way through the educational system without being supported makes introducing RTI daunting. Students not meeting benchmarks based on previously learned creates many obstacles for those secondary professionals given the task of providing individuals support for all students.

Compton, Fuchs & Fuchs (2004) also warn schools about keeping entry points in mind when evaluating responsiveness to intervention. They recommend an assortment of assessments to help educators and those making eligibility decisions accurately determine whether or not a child needs Special Education services. Conclusions of the study were given and also recommended that a component of unresponsiveness be addressed. Students’ unresponsiveness to various assessments should be examined. One would want to know if unresponsiveness is due to a lack of skills that were previously taught, or a need for more support with current content. These types of inconsistencies have also pushed researchers to examine possible pitfalls relating to RTI.

Crawford, Schatschneider, and Wagner (2008) conducted a study which examined some of the limitations of the RTI process. This study concluded that use of curriculum based assessments to monitor progress was not effective, nor indicative of further student progress. Also, the researchers grew skeptical that RTI was an effective way of addressing student needs. A comparison was made that RTI was much like the IQ discrepancy model and was a “wait to fail” model. They also concluded that RTI has many factors that question the reliability of the process. Teacher quality and differential effectiveness of instruction and intervention were mentioned. Having this kind of variability in the process can cause fault when it comes to identifying students for Special Education services.
A study of students at a Greek school conducted by Antiniou, Padeliadu, and Sideridis in 2008 also shows the possibility of teacher bias being a reason for ineffectiveness of RTI. The study examined the rate of classification of students by teachers given various characteristics of the students. The study found that male teachers were more likely to classify students as having a learning disability than were female teachers by a rate of 2:1. This example of bias paired with the relative subjectivity of the RTI process can cause problems with both rates of classifications in schools or a lack of classification when needed.

Despite the possible pitfalls of the RTI process, instructionally, it has been proven to be effective as a means for helping schools identify students with learning disabilities. This process can also be used by schools to address the behavioral needs of its students. A similar three-tiered system is used by schools to aid in attending to students who display more specific behavioral needs.

Several studies (Cheney, Flower & Templeton, 2008; Ewing, Jeffrey, McCurdy, & Polis, 2009; Fairbanks, Guardino, Lathrop & Sugai, 2007) were conducted that displayed the findings of the effectiveness of tier 2, more individualized supports put into place for students. In these studies, researchers examined how teachers had implemented more student-centered behavioral systems in classrooms. Cheney et al. measured the effectiveness of a process called Check, Connect and Expect (CCE). The process focuses on students who were not meeting their school’s social expectations.

The CCE process involves student behavior goal settings and close monitoring of students by a pre-determined adult in the school. This process provides feedback to students about their behavior during various time intervals in their day using a rating scale. Teachers are able to provide feedback to students about their behaviors by filling out the form after the
allotted time. Cheney et al. found that a majority of students, approximately 67% responded to the CCE intervention. The research also showed only a small group of students that were exposed to this intervention were then referred for Special Education classification. This evidence shows how more specifically focused attention to student behavior results in lower numbers of students placed in more restrictive environments outside of the general education classroom.

In a similar study by Fairbanks et al. (2007), a process called Check in and Check out (CICO) was explained. In this study, the behaviors of a group of second graders were examined. The students identified in this study were considered non-responders to tier 1 behavioral interventions. The CICO process was used as a tier 2 intervention implemented to help improve classroom behaviors of these students. This study showed that the CICO process proved to be effective for a majority of the students for which it was implemented. Problem behaviors, as defined by the researchers, were found to improve with this intervention. Students who did not respond to this intervention were then given additional support by the implementation of more function-based intervention. These students also were noted as showing improvements in problem behaviors. Researchers further explained how this strategy is not only effective with improving student behavior, but also boasts both simple planning, and easy use in the classroom.

In the study by Ewing et al. (2009), researchers also speak about the importance of teacher training when implementing behavioral interventions with students. Maintaining a staff of highly qualified teachers and providing continuing education for them is an important issue stated in the research. The study shows how students tend to improve behavior, if their teacher displays more quality classroom management and behavioral intervention techniques. It also suggests that maybe a 3 tiered approach be provided to evaluate teachers and provide feedback.
These ideas all center around the idea of both teachers and students alike being offered the opportunity to be supported in the appropriate way to be successful. Carpenter et al. (2009) also found in a survey that only 66.7% of educators surveyed had actually received formal training in RTI. This training focused on what RTI is. Carpenter et al. suggest further training is needed with regards to implementation of RTI to better help educators.

In an article by Edwards and Klingner (2006), RTI was noted as being a step in the right direction for students from culturally diverse backgrounds. Traditionally disproportionate, the classification of students of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may make a positive change. The authors see many benefits to implementing the RTI process in schools. The benefits of more individualized instruction for students in need, is precisely what they see as being needed. The authors believe that schools have a duty to implement processes that are culturally and linguistically diverse to meet the needs of students and provide appropriate interventions.

A group that has been shown to benefit from RTI interventions is that of English Language Learners (ELL). A study in 2007 by Grave, Gersten, and McIntosh revealed positive results for RTI methods used with ELL students in a first and second grade classroom. Students benefited from intensive small group instruction combined with quality large group instruction in the classroom. The study found a very small group of students that were classified with learning disabilities after these interventions. These results show progress toward helping these students to be successful in the school setting instead of waiting for them to fail within the system before receiving support.
Introduction

This study was conducted after completing the preceding literature review. During the literature review, it was noted that staff members in schools were in need of training relating to RTI. Some staff members were aware of RTI, but didn’t know much about how it works. The study was created to discover if the need also existed in a school that had previously introduced the RTI concept to the staff that works there. The study had the purpose of discovering areas in which the staff members felt training was adequate, and also uncovering areas in which the staff felt more training was needed.

Method

Participants

The participants of the study were teachers, counselors, psychologists, support staff and administrators at a rural school in upstate New York. The participants were solicited via email to participate in the study. Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants work with students in various grade levels, Pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. Participants noted their position title by answering the first question of the survey.

A total of 127 surveys were received; 95 were analyzed for the study. Surveys not analyzed and included in this study were omitted because of them not being completed fully. Of the surveys analyzed, 49% were general education teachers, 20% were special education teachers, 12% were support staff, 15% teacher aid/assistant, and 4% administrators.

Procedure

The survey was created using Qualtrics software provided by St. John Fisher College. After receiving permission from the administrators in the participating schools, the survey was distributed via email to the employees. The participants were given 10 days to complete the
survey online. After the survey was closed, the data was analyzed by looking at responses in two different ways; participants as a whole and by each individual job title.

**Data Analysis**

Using the responses from the online survey software, data was analyzed using charts and percentages that were generated by the program. The data was analyzed first by results from all participants. Answers to questions were analyzed and compared to the total number of participants. Secondly, the data was analyzed by looking at results from each specific job title.

**Results**

Analysis of the data shows that 93% of the participants had heard of RTI before taking the survey. Of the 23% of participants that hadn’t heard of RTI, 75% said that they the school does provide some kind of individualized support system for students that struggle academically or behaviorally. Just over 60% people who took the survey had received training about RTI. Those who had received training said that during the training session various aspects of effective RTI practices were discusses. The topics of three-tiered leveled support, progress monitoring, support teams and the behavioral aspect of RTI were discussed the most during their training. At least 60% of participants noted that one of more of these topics was discussed during their training.

When asked about the duration of their training, participants were given several time frames to describe the length of their training. There was a split with these results. Of the participants that attended training for RTI, 39% said that it was 6 hours or fewer. A majority, 59% described it as being one day or longer. Very few responses, 5%, gave answers of a time period between 6 hours to a day.
When participants were asked about administering baseline testing to their students, 77% said that they performed something similar to this in their classrooms. The study also asked participants about their knowledge of various topics or aspects of a successful RTI program. The study showed that most participants rated themselves as having at least average knowledge of all topics given as a choice. The data shows that teacher aides and assistants know the least with regard to the topics asked about in the study. Almost half of the participants that identified as teacher aide or assistant stated that they had limited to no knowledge of how the RTI initiatives described worked within their school.

Also, participants were asked about the special education referral process and their role within it. Participants were asked to choose which pieces of information they were personally responsible for providing when they are referring a student for special education services. Special education teachers and administrators were very knowledgeable about what types of resources were required in the referral process, naming many things such as observation forms and functional behavior assessments.

Examining the data, it was noted that general education teachers and teacher aides/assistants were less knowledgeable and produced a much smaller list of things that were required of them during the referral process. Similar results were true of the referral process for students who are struggling behaviorally.

Within the survey the participants were asked about the current level of training that they receive about specific topics. A basis for RTI’s success is the use of research based practices. The participants only rated their current level of training about research based practices at 52% out of 100%. Participants rated training about providing academic support at 68% and training about providing behavioral support at only 56%.
A correlation can be noted between the 68% and also the exposure to topics such as differentiated instruction that they have had. The survey showed that 84% of the participants have had training relating to differentiated instruction. Though the number of participants that have experienced training about differentiated instruction is many, only 17% of participants said that they always use differentiation strategies in their classrooms. Participants expressed a need for further training as well. The survey indicated that 42% of participants desire more training with regards to differentiated instruction.

The survey also showed that participants desired further training about both behavioral strategies and also pull-out instructional strategies. When participants were asked about their personal desire for more training about specific topics relating to RTI, 42% of them said that they would like more training about pull-out strategies and behavioral strategies to use in their classrooms.

Survey participants were asked about their experiences with students that struggle both academically and behaviorally. They were asked how often during their time working in a school they had experienced students that were beyond their capabilities both academically and behaviorally. The results varied between the different roles of employees.

Of the special education teachers that participated, 75% said that at some point during their time working in a school they experienced students with behavioral needs beyond their capabilities. Of the general education teachers, only 54% had experienced children with the same needs. Academically, 69% of general education teachers reported having students that were beyond their capabilities. Special education teacher data reported a lower percentage of 46% who had experienced children with academic needs beyond their capabilities. Teacher
aides and assistants reported that 70% of them had experienced students with behavioral needs and 60% of students with academic needs beyond their capabilities.

When asked if they receive adequate support for students that have needs beyond their capabilities, 71% of special education teachers said yes for students with behavioral needs and slightly higher at 81% for students with academic needs. General education teachers reported numbers slightly higher at 92% for students with behavioral needs and lower numbers at 67% for students with academic needs. Teacher aides and assistants said yes at 70% and 88% for behavioral and academic needs respectively.

When asked to describe the supports that are available to them for students that are struggling behaviorally, a majority of participants named resources involving administrative or counseling support. All of these resources were identified by 70% to 86% of the participants. Strategies such as training about new management techniques, additional classroom support, or alternative learning environments were only identified by 40% of the participants.

**Discussion**

The analysis of this data from employees within one school system leads to many discussion points regarding the Response to Intervention model. The data also gives insight into further implications of the RTI model within the school. Looking at the responses from all employees, it appears that the school has already implemented many facets of the RTI model before the survey was completed. The data from the survey suggests some improvements in the model that the school presently has in place.

RTI is still a relatively new initiative in many schools. Previous review of the literature has shown that schools have a wide variety of models for RTI and are at many different stages of development of their programs (Bender et al., 2009). Strengths shown with the program at the
school used during this study include a PBIS initiative, and a relatively good start of staff training. The school also showed strengths by indicating their strong training in the area of differentiated instruction. A school such as this could benefit from transferring these skills that have been taught and used effectively within the school, into a more structured form of RTI. The use of differentiated instruction mirrors the basis for using RTI. The use of these two initiatives together would provide the support to students based on individual needs. The concept of tiered instruction could be further developed and used within the RTI framework. Making these strategies common practice among all teachers and instructional support staff, is essential to program longevity and effectiveness.

The tiered levels of support that RTI is based on are used as a method to support different student abilities. Many teachers feel comfortable with providing strategies to support students at the largest tier of RTI, but seem to lack knowledge and skills needed to provide the support of the smaller group. This was noted in the survey, specifically with regards to students that struggle behaviorally.

One of the questions in the survey asked participants about their experience with students that display behaviors beyond their capabilities to control. One could speculate about the relative experience of these teachers and how it might affect their answers. Answers given during the survey could also represent a more honest answer given from a more inexperienced teacher. These individuals may find it more of a struggle to maintain solid management strategies within the first few years of teaching. This group of teachers may greatly benefit from RTI implementation. One could also speculate about the amount of training, with regards to behavioral management techniques, that these participants have had in both their pre-service experience and while being employed.
Regardless of said speculation, both the literature and results from the survey seem to suggest that all employees that work in a school display a need for further training about new management and behavioral strategies. Schools looking to train teachers about RTI strategies should look to implement methods that can be implemented with smaller, more specific cases of misbehavior. This school and others should look beyond how a teacher manages a class of twenty five students, and more at how they can support the two or three from the class that aren’t responding to generic management strategies.

Much can also be said for the use of RTI for behavioral support within a school system. The process of classifying students with emotional/behavioral disorders is often a difficult process. It is one full of behavior rating scales and subjective data given by both outside observers and parents. Using a method such as the Check-in/Check-out system to more specifically monitor a student’s behavioral progress is a very manageable system that could be a step in the right direction for schools. Schools, such as the one in this study, can also benefit from allowing staff members to work collaboratively to share best practices for management. They can also benefit from more openly discussing more common areas in which students need to be supported behaviorally.

Another result of the survey, also found in the literature, was of the lack of training provided to teachers and other employees within the school. RTI is a complex initiative that involves more than just one or two sessions to learn. If a school district is to carry out this initiative to the best of its abilities, thorough training must be provided. As stated in both the literature and in this study, employees desire the tools to execute the processes involved with RTI, but simply aren’t receiving adequate training. Specifically in this study, participants
desired training on small group pull-out instruction and, as previously stated, behavioral strategies to support students.

Inclusion of all employees in this training is of the utmost importance. Teacher aides and assistants made this point in the study. Of all the employees that took the survey, these people were those who both received the least amount of training and most strongly expressed desire for it. Keeping in mind that the education of a child includes a very large and diverse group of people, schools must keep in mind the need to make everyone that is part of a child’s education well informed. Knowing how initiatives work and having the tools to help implement them are essential for the functionality of a support system such as RTI.

**Limitations and Future Research**

During the distribution and intake period of this survey, participants that identify as school counselors and psychologists indicated a concern about these titles not being included as an option for identifying position titles. More specific job descriptions would be needed in the future to include these types of employees.

Further study of this topic could be completed if grade levels were included when asking participants about defining their job titles. Because RTI initiatives are mostly found at the elementary level currently, this information would be helpful to further analyze the implementation at the secondary levels. Also, information about what subject areas the participants work with could give further information about the effectiveness of RTI in more than the areas of reading or math.
References


