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Examining the Utility of the Response to Intervention Framework in Meeting the Needs of All Learners

Abstract

The Response to Intervention framework is an effective means for or of identifying Specific Learning Disabilities. This study examined one school's utilization of the framework in meeting the needs of a continuum of learners from those who struggle to those in need of advanced options. A case study format was utilized, involving an elementary school in a suburban school district in Colorado. Through classroom observations, teacher interviews and dialogue with the site's Problem-Solving Team, principal, and a focus group, the Response to Intervention framework proved to be an effective model in meeting the needs of all learners. In addition, the RtI framework was used at this site as a more inclusive approach for identifying and serving gifted learners than traditional identification methods. The findings of this study have important implications with regard to instructional practices in general, as well as in gifted identification and programming practices.

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First Advisor

Kent Seidel, Ph.D.

Second Advisor

Linda Brookhart, Ph.D.

Third Advisor

Susan Korach

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EXAMINING THE UTILITY OF THE RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION
FRAMEWORK IN MEETING THE NEEDS OF ALL LEARNERS

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the Morgridge College of Education

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Robin J. Carey

June 2011

Advisors: Kent Seidel, PhD and Linda Brookhart, PhD

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Author: Robin Carey

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The Response to Intervention framework is an effective means for or of identifying Specific Learning Disabilities. This study examined one school's utilization of the framework in meeting the needs of a continuum of learners from those who struggle to those in need of advanced options. A case study format was utilized, involving an elementary school in a suburban school district in Colorado. Through classroom observations, teacher interviews and dialogue with the site's Problem-Solving Team, principal, and a focus group, the Response to Intervention framework proved to be an effective model in meeting the needs of all learners. In addition, the RtI framework was used at this site as a more inclusive approach for identifying and serving gifted learners than traditional identification methods. The findings of this study have important implications with regard to instructional practices in general, as well as in gifted identification and programming practices.

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Chapter One: Introduction

“It is important that students bring a certain ragamuffin, barefoot, irreverence to their studies; they are not here to worship what is known, but to question it.”

-Jacob Chanowski

Historically, minority and low socioeconomic students have been over-represented in special education (Burns, Jacob, & Wagner, 2008; Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly, & Vaughn, 2004). Conversely, it is well documented that gifted programs traditionally reflect an underrepresentation of students from minority and low socioeconomic backgrounds (Delcourt, Cornell, & Goldberg, 2007; Passow & Frasier, 1996). In order to address the cause for disproportional identification and provide programming to ensure all students realize their full potential, we must begin with the point of initial referral, the general classroom setting. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) both encourage the utilization of a Response to Intervention (RtI) framework to ensure positive outcomes for all students.

Purpose of the Study

It is the role of educational leaders and teachers to encourage, enhance, and engage the learner so he or she might never lose that “certain ragamuffin, barefoot, irreverence.” We must not put the learner on a lock-step path of our choosing, whereby

the journey of education is really one in which the learner has no voice, no ownership, and no joy. It is our responsibility to hear and attend to the voice of all learners.

In my view, the purpose of education is to prepare the learners of today to be positive contributors to a future we have not yet conceived. This isn't accomplished solely with "book" learning, although a solid foundation in literacy, numeracy, the sciences and the humanities is paramount; rather, I believe it is fostered by engaging the learner in both critical and creative thinking opportunities.

Ron Ritchhart, researcher at Project Zero, Harvard Graduate School of Education, and author of *Intellectual Character*, talks about creating a culture of thinking wherein eight cultural forces are utilized in order to provide the learner an opportunity to think critically, creatively, analytically. The cultural forces include Time, Opportunities, Resources & Structures, Language, Modeling, Interactions & Relationships, Physical Environment, and Expectations (Ritchhart, 2002). Ritchhart's work is significant in that the cultural forces and thinking routines are not predicated on any perceived student ability or 'label' (gifted learner, student with special needs, English Language Learner). Rather, routinely maximizing the eight cultural forces provides a venue for all students to engage in multiple ways of thinking and learning, the ultimate purpose of education.

The maximization and encouragement of appropriate thinking routines brings to mind the Dr. Seuss book, *Hooray for Diffendoofer Day!* (1998). This charming story paints a picture of the purpose of education in light of the testing and accountability mindset in the "No Child Left Behind" era. As the doom and gloom attitudes arrive with "testing season," Miss Bonkers puts all fears to rest:

‘Don’t fret!’ she said.
‘You’ve learned the things you need
To pass that test and many more –
I’m certain you’ll succeed.
We’ve taught you that the earth is round,
That red and white make pink,
And something else that matters more –
We’ve taught you how to think’ (p. 26).

The students at the Diffendoofer School need not have worried about the upcoming mandated tests. Because they had been taught to think, they “got the very highest score!” (p. 30).

Children are naturally active beings and learn when they are engaged and in love with what they are learning. I am invigorated by schools where activities such as role-playing, investigating, debating and inquiry are commonplace. Further, it is my belief that the main role of the school must be to serve the needs of the learner. All aspects of the school must exude a climate of caring that is student centered with an academic focus. Nel Noddings, as cited in Smith (2004) says, “We do not merely tell them (students) to care and give them texts to read on the subject, we demonstrate our caring in our relations with them” (p. 5). Academic excellence and social-emotional wellness is a goal for all and student needs are put at the forefront.

All learners must have a foundation built on strong literacy and numeracy skills as well as in the liberal and performing arts. It is also critical to provide the foundational 21st Century skills students need in order to be active participants in the global community. Having said that, I also emphatically believe that we must take our cue from the learner in determining the “what” and the “how” of our curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. Standards are a guide; without the learner voice, however, as

Noddings (in Clinchy, 1997) articulates, standards may serve to discourage “critical thinking, creativity, and novelty...” perhaps leading to “an even grosser level of mediocrity” (p. 4).

When using the terminology “all learners,” I do not mean to imply that all learners are taught the same curriculum with the same instructional methodology; rather, I concur with Dewey’s philosophy that education should be tailored to the child. We know from Noddings that Dewey insisted, “...students must be involved in setting objectives for their own learning” (Noddings, 2007, Kindle location 431-36). Within that context, strong literacy skills in reading and writing are critical to the future of not only the learner but for our nation and the world, as well. For instance, it has been widely reported that a connection exists between incarceration rates and third grade reading scores. In terms of mathematics, all learners must be able to identify patterns and develop the deep mathematical reasoning skills to solve real problems. In a challenging economic climate it is increasingly important to provide learners with the tools to develop financial literacy, as well.

Without a well-rounded education that considers the interests and needs of the learner, including opportunities in the liberal and performing arts, we will lose our children to boredom and apathy before we can ever hope to develop their thinking processes and skills as 21st Century learners. These are not the skills or tasks that can be measured on a standardized assessment; they do, however, engage learners in ways that provide them with the opportunities to contribute as critical and creative thinkers and problem solvers – the skills that allow them to knock the test scores out of the ballpark!

An instructional framework is essential to meeting the needs of all learners. A determination of what all students should know, understand, and be able to do is a place to start, but it doesn't end there. It is critical that we provide, through our instructional processes, the opportunity for students to grow in ways that are commensurate with their abilities. Our students have unlimited potential, and come to us with differing levels of readiness, skills and aptitudes. Effective instruction to meet the needs of all learners most certainly cannot be "one size fits all;" it must be differentiated to meet the individual needs of the students. It is essential that teachers are adept at providing a combination of whole group direct instruction, small group focused instruction, and one-on-one instruction targeted to a particular student's needs. The Response to Intervention framework provides a process wherein the teaching/learning cycle is strengthened by data to inform instructional decisions, progress is systematically monitored, and problem-solving teams discuss appropriate interventions to address the strengths and struggles of each individual learner.

As leaders, we must encourage teachers to use multiple strategies, engaging the learner in a curriculum that puts history in context, where content has relevance, and the curriculum has a scope and sequence building on prior knowledge. In meeting the needs of all learners, teachers provide an array of avenues for students to demonstrate the learning. Classroom teachers are faced with ever-increasing demands. In order to effectively meet the needs of the diverse learners they are responsible for, a deep understanding of the content area they are teaching is critical; they must be able to teach it in a way that is meaningful to the students in their classrooms. A combination of instructional approaches must be employed, encompassing student-based, discipline-

based and inquiry-based learning. Different students, situations and content areas all call for different methods.

My interest in conducting a study focused on the utility of the Response to Intervention framework in meeting the needs of all learners is influenced by the words of Nel Noddings (1999): “We should want more from our educational efforts than adequate academic achievement, and we will not achieve even that meager success unless our children believe that they themselves are cared for and learn to care for others.” For it is in these relationships that we not only allow a safe place for the learners to bring their sense of “ragamuffin, barefoot, irreverence to their studies,” we also encourage them to flourish as caring and productive human beings.

After an extensive review of the literature regarding the Response to Intervention framework, a series of questions were developed to serve as a guide throughout the research process:

- What are the genuine questions the study seeks to answer?
- What are the types of measures that will answer those questions?
- How will an ongoing analysis of the data inform next steps?
- How will necessary adjustments be made along the way?
- What action will result from the findings of the study?

The first two questions encompass the research question and sub-questions as well as the matrices and protocols (Appendices A, B, and C) developed to gather data throughout the study. The remaining three questions were used as the data gathering process was underway, and also informed the analysis of the findings and recommendations for future study.

Research Question

This study investigated the following research question:

How can the Response to Intervention framework be utilized to support the needs of all learners? In addition, two sub-questions were explored:

- a) How can the RtI framework be utilized to support the needs of gifted learners?
- b) How can the RtI framework be used to identify and support the needs of ethnic minority and low socio-economic learners for gifted programming?

A case study was utilized, comprised of teachers and leaders at a public elementary school in a suburban school district in Colorado.

Significance of the Study

The justification for this study is multifaceted. An examination of existing literature points to promising research in support of utilizing the RtI framework as a means to identifying Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD), as opposed to using a traditional approach via the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) discrepancy model. In addition to the research, the RtI process for identifying SLD is supported in Federal Law through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, more commonly referred to as No Child Left Behind (2001) or “NCLB,” as well as Colorado State Statute and the Exception Children’s Education Act (ECEA) rules. The interest of this researcher is in determining whether the framework is effective in serving the needs of all learners, including those diverse learners who demonstrate advanced potential and/or advanced ability leading to identification as gifted learners.

There is a significant gap in the extant literature. The search terms “gifted” + “Response to Intervention” were entered in the following databases: Academic Search Complete, 360 Search, Google Scholar, Peak Digital, Prospector, and World Cat. To date, no empirical research studies have been conducted utilizing the RtI construct with highly able learners to determine identification and programming needs. As stated previously, research exists with regard to the framework’s use in identification of students with Specific Learning Disabilities. There is much discourse regarding the persistent disproportional representation of ethnic minority and low SES students in special education and gifted education programs when using traditional identification practices. Two key factors play a role in supporting the use of the RtI framework to meet the needs of all learners: 1) the utilization of cut scores from IQ or aptitude testing has proven to yield disproportionate identification of ethnic minority and low socioeconomic students in special and gifted education programs; and 2) a single number from an IQ or aptitude test does not provide practitioners with data to inform instructional practices in order to ensure commensurate academic growth for the learner.

Definition of Terms

The following are operationalized definitions of terms utilized throughout the study.

Body of evidence – convergence of data to include aptitude, ability, performance, teacher, parent, and student input, documenting strengths and needs in the identification process for gifted programming.

Data Driven Decision-making – planning for student success (both academic and behavioral) through the use of ongoing progress monitoring and analysis of data (CDE, 2008).

Ethnic minority – a group of people who have a different ethnicity, religion, language or culture to that of the majority of people in the place where they live (ethnic minority, n.d., *Wiktionary.org*).

Fidelity of Implementation, interventions – ensuring interventions are implemented according to their research base (CDE, 2008).

Fidelity of Implementation, framework – ensuring the framework is implemented with consistency system-wide.

Gifted – A gifted person is someone who shows, or has the potential for showing, an exceptional level of performance in one or more areas of expression (National Association for Gifted Children).

Progress Monitoring – collecting and analyzing data about student progress to determine the effectiveness of the intervention (CDE, 2008).

Problem-Solving Process – a collaborative team structure for addressing the academic and/or behavioral concerns through monitoring and evaluating interventions based on data (CDE, 2008).

Problem-Solving Team – membership is comprised of individuals who have a diverse set of skills and expertise that can address a variety of behavioral and academic needs (CDE, 2008).

Response to Intervention (RtI) – a framework that promotes a well-integrated system connecting general, compensatory, gifted and special education in providing high

quality, standards-based instruction and intervention that is matched to students' academic, social/emotional, and behavioral needs (CDE, 2008).

Socioeconomic Status – an individual's or group's position within a hierarchical social structure. Socioeconomic status depends on a combination of variables, including occupation, education, income, wealth, and place of residence (socioeconomic status, n.d., *The American Heritage® New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*).

Three-tiered Service Delivery – providing different levels of instruction (universal, targeted, and intensive) based on the student's response to intervention.

Twice-exceptional – 1. Students who are identified as gifted and talented in one or more areas of exceptionality (specific academics, general intellectual ability, creativity, leadership, visual, or performing arts); and also identified with: 2. A disability defined by Federal/State eligibility criteria: specific learning disability, significant identifiable emotional disability, physical disabilities, sensory disabilities, autism, or ADHD (CDE, 2009).

Universal Assessment/Screening – brief measures intended to provide an initial indication of which students are entering the school year at-risk for academic difficulties (Colorado Department of Education [CDE], 2008).

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

The construct of Response to Intervention for use with all learners is contextualized through a review of the literature with respect to the following areas: the history and evolution of the Response to Intervention framework, the history and evolution of gifted identification and programming, ethnic minority and low socio-economic students and gifted programming, and the use of the RtI framework as a strength-based model to identify and serve gifted learners. Teacher perceptions, views, and attitudes emerged as a thread throughout the literature and are also addressed.

Response to Intervention

Federal and State law. Response to Intervention, a multi-tiered instructional framework, is cited in both Federal and State law as a means to more effectively serve the needs of all learners. The final regulations for the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) were published in the Federal Register on August 14, 2006, and became effective on October 13, 2006. The United State Department of Education, in a question and answer support document (Building the Legacy: IDEA, 2004), indicate:

The final regulations incorporate new requirements regarding identifying children with specific learning disabilities (SLD) and early intervening services (EIS). With regard to identifying children with SLD, the regulations: (1) allow a local educational agency (LEA) to consider a child's response to scientific, research-based intervention as part of the SLD determination process; (2) allow States to use other alternative research-based procedures for determining whether a child

has a SLD; (3) provide that States may not require the use of a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement to determine whether a child has a SLD; and (4) require a public agency to use the State criteria in determining whether a child has a SLD and discuss the role that response to scientific research-based interventions plays in a comprehensive evaluation process. The regulations regarding EIS permit an LEA to use not more than 15% of its IDEA Part B funds to develop and implement EIS.

Authority: The requirements for using a process based on a child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention when determining that the child is a child with a specific learning disability are found in the regulations at 34 CFR §§300.307, 300.309 and 300.311.

The requirements for early intervening services are found in the regulations at 34 CFR §§300.205(d), 300.208(a)(2), 300.226 and 300.646(b)(2).

Further, the State’s charge is to adopt criteria for the identification of Specific Learning Disabilities as set forth in the Act (CDE, 2008, Guidelines, p. 7):

§300.307 Specific learning disabilities.

(a) General. A State must adopt, consistent with §300.309, criteria for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability as defined in §300.8(c)(10). In addition, the criteria adopted by the State--

1. Must not require the use of a severe discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, as defined in §300.8(c)(10);
2. Must permit the use of a process based on the child’s response to scientific, research-based intervention; and
3. May permit the use of other alternative research-based procedures for determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, as defined in §300.8(c)(10).

(b) Consistency with State criteria. A public agency must use the State criteria adopted pursuant to paragraph (a) of this section in determining whether a child has a specific learning disability.

Finally, Exceptional Children Education Act (ECEA) Rule 2.08 (6)(b)(ii), indicates the following criteria for identification with the RtI framework:

The child does not achieve adequately for the child's age or to meet State-approved grade-level standards in one or more of the following areas, when provided with learning experiences and instruction appropriate for the child's age or state-approved grade-level standards:

- Oral expression;
- Listening comprehension;
- Written expression;
- Basic reading skill;
- Reading fluency skills;
- Reading comprehension;
- Mathematical calculation;
- Mathematics problem solving; and

The child does not make sufficient progress to meet age or state-approved grade-level standards in one or more of the areas identified in section 2.08(6)(b)(i) when using a process based on the child's response to scientific, evidence-based intervention as determined by a body of evidence demonstrating academic skill deficit(s) and insufficient progress in response to scientific, evidence-based intervention (CDE, 2008, *Guidelines*, pp. 8-9).

This legislation is critical in meeting the needs of all learners, as it moves us away from an arbitrary number used to determine placement in a program and toward a process by which the classroom teacher, in collaboration with support staff and other school personnel, provides effective, evidence-based instruction and interventions based on the demonstrated needs and strengths of the learner.

Background.

Essential components. Response to Intervention is generally expressed as a multitier instructional framework utilizing a coordinated system of universal screening, data-driven decisions, evidence-based interventions, and ongoing progress monitoring

The visual representation signifies a fluid and circular process incorporating problem definition, analysis, solution implementation and evaluation. Family and Community support envelope the process. Ideally, at each tier students' responses to instruction are monitored and interventions are provided based on student need. At Tier I, or the universal level, all students are provided high quality, evidence-based instruction. It is the intent of the Response to Intervention framework to strengthen universal classroom instruction, thereby providing all students the opportunity to grow as learners. Students who struggle at the universal level are provided additional supports at Tier II, or the targeted level. Should those students continue to struggle, they are provided intensive, often one-on-one intervention, at the third tier.

In addition to the three-tiered instructional model, according to CDE's *Response to Intervention: A Practitioner's Guide to Implementation* (2008), effective implementation of the RtI framework includes the following six essential components: 1) Leadership; 2) Curriculum and Instruction; 3) School Climate and Culture; 4) Problem-Solving Process; 5) Assessment; and 6) Family and Community Involvement (p. 4).

Leadership is essential in any significant change initiative. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) describe the complexity of the role of leadership in change by saying, "Change in education is easy to propose, hard to implement, and extraordinarily difficult to sustain." "Sustainable improvement depends on successful leadership" (p. 1). Further, they posit "If the first challenge of change is to ensure it is desirable, and the second challenge is to make it doable, then the biggest challenge of all is to make it durable and sustainable" (p. 2).

VanDerHeyden, Witt, and Gilbertson (2007) state “The basic concept of RtI is that when provided with effective intervention, a student can be determined to have responded or not responded adequately to that intervention and such information can be used to guide service delivery decisions” (p. 226). RtI incorporates a problem-solving approach to determine appropriate interventions matched to student need. The behavioral or academic problem is identified, the cause is analyzed, and a possible treatment or intervention is put in place and modified as needed (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). The hallmark of RtI according to Kratochwill, Volpiansky, Clements, and Ball (2007) is the “combination of systematic progress monitoring and movement across tiers of intervention for making decisions...” (p. 619). The Colorado Department of Education (2008) further describes this process in outlining the Problem-Solving Team (PST) as a collaborative group of individuals including teachers, specialists, administrators, and parents who possess diverse skills and expertise including a shared interest in the growth the of individual learner from a behavioral and academic viewpoint (p. 17).

Three trends exist with regard to the implementation of the Response to Intervention framework: providing effective instruction and interventions, identifying and serving struggling learners, and attending to professional development needs.

Effective instruction. The quality of instruction and interventions at all levels of the framework is paramount to its utility as a means to identify students with a specific learning disability. As stated previously, in the RtI framework students are provided high quality, effective instruction at the universal level. Ardoin, Witt, Connell, and Koenig (2005) point out that when determining a student’s eligibility for special education

services, “schools cannot determine that a student has a reading problem without the student previously being exposed to quality instruction” (p. 363). The Fuchs article (2006) goes further, indicating that after tutoring, two-thirds of a group of first grade students identified by teachers as the poorest readers responded to interventions to the extent they caught up with their classmates. Vellutino et al. (as cited in Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006) surmised that these students “had not really been reading disabled but ‘instructionally’ disabled” (p. 95). Several researchers concur that difficulties in school are closely linked to effective instruction, thereby making it essential to rule out weak or inappropriate instruction that is not targeted to the needs of the learner before making any identification decisions about a child (Chard et al., 2008; Burns et al., 2008; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005). In a longitudinal study of an effective multilevel reading and math instructional program, VanDerHeyden et al. (2007) found that minority students were not disproportionately referred for special education evaluation. Systematically providing students with “adequate opportunity for learning” (IDEA as cited in Fletcher et al., 2004, p. 307) through enhanced instruction, allows school professionals to make special education referral decisions based on the students response to instruction, ensuring that the students who truly need protection under IDEA are, in fact, the students receiving those services.

Identifying struggling learners. Utilizing the RtI framework to identify students with a learning disability (LD) is supported in both IDEA and NCLB. Traditional methods employed a formula to determine the discrepancy between a student’s IQ and his or her achievement in school to identify a student as LD. There are many issues with

a dependence on the IQ-Achievement discrepancy model to label students as having a learning disability. Inconsistencies are common among practitioners, both in the computation of the discrepancy and in how students are identified and served (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Shinn, 2007). There are significant differences in what is stated as policy, which Shinn (2007) calls “do as I say,” and what schools actually have operationalized in practice, or “do as I do” (p. 603). Proponents of the RtI framework point out that an IQ score cannot tell you what a student can learn; rather, it can only show what a student has not yet learned (Fletcher et al., 2004). Many believe that utilizing RtI as a means to identify students with a learning disability will decrease the number of students who are incorrectly identified as LD, via ongoing progress monitoring of a student’s response to intervention, rather than relying on IQ-Achievement discrepancy (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006). Mastropieri and Scruggs (2005) question whether an RtI approach alone will accurately identify students as LD. They, along with Ardoin et al. (2005), raise several questions with respect to the older student, the role of teachers and other school personnel, fidelity of implementation, and consistency at the state and national levels. There are those who support a third approach to the identification of LD, blending the discrepancy model and the RtI framework (Fletcher, Denton, & Francis, 2005; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005). According to Mastropieri and Scruggs (2005), preserving the strengths of both models allows for a greater responsibility on the part of the classroom teacher to provide evidence-based instruction as well as ensuring the identification of LD is documented by more than one assessment or measure.

Professional development. The connection of professional development to fidelity of implementation, effective instruction and intervention, and ultimately positive student outcomes is highlighted in several of the articles reviewed (Kratochwill, Volpiansky, Clements & Ball, 2007; Danielson, Doolittle, & Bradley, 2007; Shinn, 2007). In order to ensure sustainability and to realize the promise of the RtI framework as a means to identifying and serving the needs of all students, systems must employ a comprehensive professional development plan to address these areas. Ardoin et al. (2005) assert, "...implementation with fidelity may be the lynchpin of RtI" (p. 378). In order for school personnel to engage in the RtI process providing evidence-based instruction, ongoing progress monitoring, and collaboration regarding identification decisions based on data, they must have the capacity to function at the highest levels in those roles (Danielson et al., 2007; Kratochwill et al., 2007). If progress monitoring is to be utilized effectively in measuring a student's response to intervention, classroom teachers and school psychologists will need additional training in this area (Shinn, 2007). Further, teachers will be more likely to implement interventions and other components of the framework if they have explicit training and follow up support in the form of resources, both human and material, scheduling, and leadership (Glover & DiPerna, 2007; Burns et al., 2008). It is critical to note that unless professional development is embedded in other elements of the school, such as student schedules, structures for collaboration, curriculum, instruction and assessment, RtI will not prove to be a sustainable practice (Kratochwill et al., 2007).

Gifted Education

The history of programs for “students at the high end of the achievement distribution stretches back to the turn of the century” (Donovan & Cross, 2002, p. 23) concurrent with the onset of compulsory education laws creating an influx of large numbers of students into public schools. It is noted that by 1920, “approximately two-thirds of all large cities had created some type of program for gifted students” (Colangelo & Davis, 2003, p. 6). However, educational leaders focused on how to go about appropriately meeting the needs of bright minds long before that time. According to the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) website, “In the late 1800s, Dr. William T. Harris, Superintendent of Schools in St. Louis, discussed a plan for the acceleration of gifted students so they would have more challenging work and not fall under the spell of laziness” (2008).

There has been a tendency to go back and forth between advocacy for excellence or for equity. Colangelo and Davis (2003) describe a “love-hate” relationship with giftedness and talent, pointing out that we admire exceptional talent and drive in individuals, while at the same time we have maintained a long standing commitment to egalitarianism in our educational systems. There has been resentment on the part of some who view gifted education programming as elitist and giving to the “haves” (p. 3). In contrast, however, Colangelo and Davis point to 1957 when the swing toward excellence was spurred on by the space race and the Russians’ *Sputnik* beating the Americans into space and in 1983 when the *A Nation at Risk* report was published (p. 3). The swing toward equity was apparent in the 1960s and 1970s and then again in the 1990s when the

focus was geared toward struggling and at-risk learners. As Colangelo and Davis articulate, the unfortunate outcome of these swings is a focus on one or the other, rather than a focus on meeting the needs of all learners (p.3).

Federal laws similar to those for students with disabilities do not govern gifted education programming; consequently, a wide variance in the types of programming currently in place for gifted learners exists from state to state.

Federal definition of giftedness. The first federal definition of giftedness was established as an outcome of the Marland Report, a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1972, studying services to gifted and talented students. The Marland Report defined gifted as:

“Children capable of high performance include those with demonstrated achievement and/or potential ability in any of the following areas, singly or in combination:

1. General intellectual ability,
2. Specific academic aptitude,
3. Creative or productive thinking,
4. Leadership ability,
5. Visual and performing arts, or
6. Psychomotor ability” (as cited in McClellan, 1985).

The report indicated 3 to 5 percent of the population could be expected to be gifted, although in 1993 some states reported more than 10 percent, while others reported fewer than 5 percent (Donovan & Cross, 2002, p. 24-25).

The current federal definition set forth in the most recent Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 2001) is based on the original definition included in the Marland Report. It states:

“Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific

academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities” (National Association of Gifted Children, 2008).

Another widely used definition in the field of gifted education is that written by Dr. Joseph Renzulli from the University of Connecticut, articulated in his seminal article “What Makes Giftedness? Re-examining a Definition” in the 1978 *Phi Delta Kappan*:

Gifted behavior occurs when there is an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits: above-average general and/or specific abilities, high levels of task commitment (motivation), and high levels of creativity. Gifted and talented children are those who possess or are capable of developing this composite of traits and applying them to any potentially valuable area of human performance (p. 261).

For the purposes of this study, a gifted person is someone who “shows, or has the potential for showing, an exceptional level of performance in one or more areas of expression” (National Association for Gifted Children, 2008).

Identification of gifted students. In an article examining the *Assumptions Underlying the Identification of Gifted and Talented Students*, Brown et al. (2005) assert, “Procedures for identifying gifted and talented students are probably the most discussed and written about topic in our field.” They further indicate, “For the better part of the previous century, test scores dominated the identification process” (p. 68).

Traditional identification procedures include:

- Tests of intellectual ability
- Above grade level performance
- Achievement and performance tests
- Rating scales

- Questionnaires
- Academic Grades

Although most states advocate for the use of a body of evidence when determining a student's identification for gifted programming, Brown et al. (2005) write that "actual practices specified in state and district guidelines continue to be dominated by cognitive ability test scores" (p. 68). One result of heavy reliance on cognitive test scores in determining gifted identification is "a disproportion in membership in the special programs for gifted students that reflects fewer Black and Hispanic students enrolled than their proportions in the population" (Gallagher, 2000, p. 6). In order to match services to fit the needs of the learner, the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC, 2008) provides *Five Guiding Principles of Student Identification* for gifted programming:

1. A comprehensive and cohesive process for student nomination must be coordinated in order to determine eligibility for gifted education services.
2. Instruments used for student assessment to determine eligibility for gifted education services must measure diverse abilities, talents, strengths, and needs in order to provide students an opportunity to demonstrate any strengths.
3. A student assessment profile of individual strengths and needs must be developed to plan appropriate intervention.
4. All student identification procedures and instruments must be based on current theory and research.
5. Written procedures for student identification must include at the very least provisions for informed consent, student retention, student reassessment, student exiting, and appeals procedures.

The Colorado Department of Education *Gifted Education Guidelines and Resources*

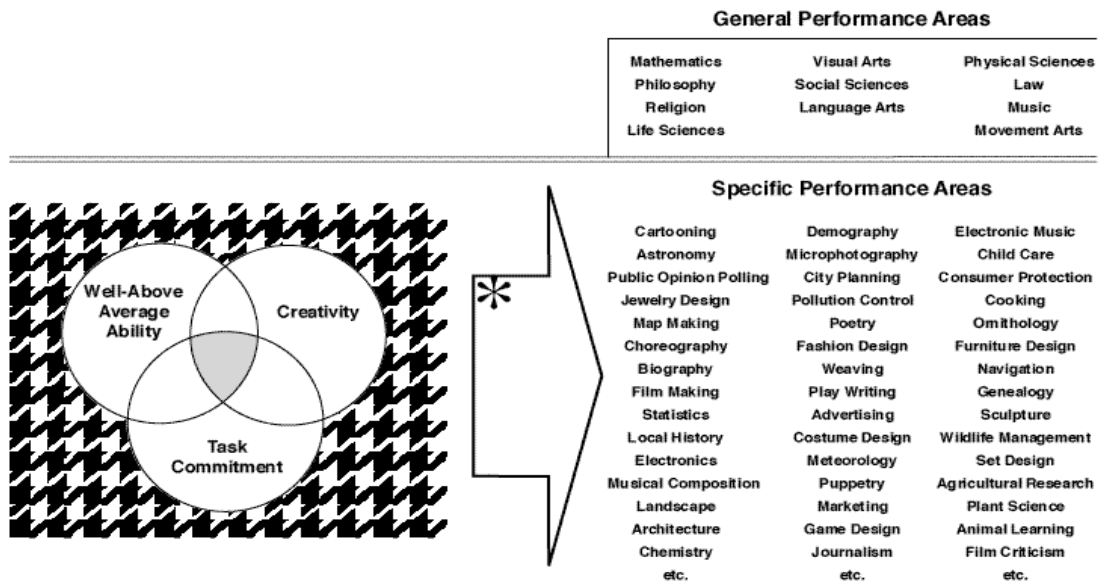
(2004) suggest six steps in identifying gifted learners. These include: 1) Increase

Understanding of Giftedness, 2) Implement a Referral Process, 3) Implement a Screening

Process, 4) Develop a Student Information Profile with a Body of Evidence, 5)

Recommend Services, and 6) Plan Effective Implementation for Services.

Renzulli’s *Three Ring Conception of Giftedness*, illustrated in Figure 2, captures the idea that “three interlocking clusters of ability characterize highly creative and productive people. These three clusters are well-above average, though not necessarily superior, ability, task commitment, and creativity. These clusters of ability are brought to bear on specific performance areas” (Renzulli, Executive Summary, 2005). This is significant in that current guidelines from the NAGC and CDE as well as Renzulli’s Three Ring Conception encourage us to be thinking in broader terms when identifying students for gifted programming; embracing a practice that is more inclusive than exclusive.



* This arrow should read as "... brought to bear upon ..."

Figure 2: Three Ring Conception of Giftedness in *Equity, Excellence, and Economy in a System for Identifying Students in Gifted Education: A Guidebook* (2005) by Joseph S. Renzulli, University of Connecticut.

This practice includes identifying high potential and providing programming to enhance and grow that potential. Whether identifying students for special education services or for gifted programming, a single number from an IQ or aptitude test does not provide practitioners with data to inform instructional practices in order to feed the potential and ensure commensurate academic growth for the learner.

Changing paradigm. Dr. George Betts, developer of the Autonomous Learner Model, indicates in his presentation titled, *The Autonomous Model for the Gifted and Talented*, “If students are to become learners, they must have the opportunity for independent individual and group work learning which means having a structure that allows and promotes the development of new knowledge for the individuals” (Betts, n.d.). In order for this to come to fruition, a shift in thinking is required to address the over-reliance on IQ and aptitude scores in identifying high potential learners. Donna Ford, author of *Equity and Excellence: Culturally Diverse Students in Gifted Education* (in Colangelo & Davis, 2003), talks about this shift in practice. The following table is adapted from her recommendations for embracing a more contemporary and broad view of gifted learners (p. 513):

Table 1

A Shift in Thinking

Traditional Beliefs and Practices	Contemporary Beliefs and Practices
Identification is a yes or no answer based on an achievement or intelligence score	Identification focuses on a profile of student strengths and needs
Measurement = a single test	Measurement = assessing in multiple ways with multiple sources
Ability is rewarded and must be demonstrated	Effort, achievement and potential are recognized
Genetics determine giftedness	Environment and genetics play a role in the characteristics of gifted learners
Students are in a gifted program	Students receive gifted services
Gifted education is a place	Gifted education is not a place
A question of excellence versus equity	Excellence and equity are not mutually exclusive
Gifted education is a privilege	Gifted education is a need

[Ford in Colangelo and Davis, *Handbook of Gifted Education* (3rd ed.) 2003]

The significance of this shift in thinking has an impact on meeting the needs of high potential learners in our schools. Using the contemporary beliefs as a guide, the programming for a high potential learner is transformed. A single test score does not give the practitioner information regarding learner strengths, interests, areas of passion, or areas of relative weakness. The body of evidence gathered in this type of process provides a road map for teachers in terms of the “what” and the “how” for high potential learners. The profile of the learner’s areas of strengths and needs are paramount in determining the appropriate curriculum, instruction, assessment, enrichment, extension,

depth, and complexity to employ in order to serve that particular learner. Students identified as high potential or gifted learners are provided with programming and services to meet their identified strengths and needs; they are not identified *for* a “program.” Gone are the days when the “gifted kids” leave the “regular” classroom at 10:20 a.m. on Tuesday to play chess or create a diorama in the “gifted” resource room. Contemporary gifted programming addresses the academic and social emotional needs of the learner, not as a reward or privilege of the “label.” The programming is specifically tied to content areas and standards appropriate to ensure commensurate growth for the learner, not consisting only of enrichment projects added on to the “regular” curriculum.

A response to intervention framework wherein classroom teachers and support staff collaborate in examining student strengths provides such a venue for the learner to develop his or her potential and to engage in content that takes into account the depth, complexity and appropriate challenge matched to individual student needs.

Ethnic Minorities and Gifted Programming

When considering ethnic minority students and gifted programming, put the relationship in context via the work of Lisa Delpit, author of a series of essays compiled in *Other People’s Children* (2006). Delpit writes of the culture of power in her essay titled, *The Silenced Dialogue*. This culture of power includes five areas for consideration:

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

3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently less aware of – or at least willing to acknowledge – its existence. Those with less power are often most aware of its existence (p. 24).

Delpit indicates the last two of the above are seldom addressed, but are significant in terms of ethnic minorities in the world of school. The learner has to understand what is expected, both academically and socially, in order to survive and thrive in an environment that is likely very different than that to which they are accustomed. Too, teachers must acknowledge and understand they hold the power in the educational setting and use that power responsibly and in the best interest of the students they serve.

The underrepresentation of ethnic minority and low SES students in gifted programming is long standing and well documented in the literature. For example, Ford, Grantham and Whiting (2008) indicate that a study conducted as far back as 1936 found that “despite high intelligence test scores African American students were not formally identified as gifted” (p. 289). Further examination over two decades indicates that “African American, Hispanic/Latino America and American Indian students have *always* been underrepresented in gifted education...” with the percentage of underrepresentation always greater than 40% (pp. 289-290). While this issue is clearly concerning to the field of gifted education, its persistence continues with no downward trend in sight. As Ford and Grantham (2003) point out, “Despite such concerns, reports, and even legislation

(e.g., *Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954), the percentage of diverse students in gifted education programs does not match their representation in U.S. schools” (p. 217).

National statistics, provided in 2002 in *Minority Students in Special and Gifted Education* (Donovan & Cross, 2002) indicate in “1976 less than one percent of all school children were identified for gifted programs” (p. 51). By 1998, the percent had grown to 6.2 percent (p. 52). During this same timeframe, the percentage rates for ethnic minorities identified for gifted programming are not proportional with the overall rates, and statistics indicate “Hispanics and blacks showed no sustained rise” (p. 54).

The state of Colorado’s ethnicity data does not deviate from the national statistics in that the underrepresentation of Native American, Black American and, most significantly Hispanic students is clear. The ethnicity breakdown for Colorado student enrollment and gifted students from the 2007-2008 school year is delineated in the following table:

Table 2

Colorado Ethnicity Data Relative to Gifted Students

Ethnicity	State Enrollment	Gifted Students
Asian	3.2	5.0
Black	6.2	4.1
Hispanic	30.2	17.4
Native American	1.3	0.8
White	59.1	72.7

Numbers shown in percentages. From *Ethnicity breakdown for state enrollment and gifted/talented* [Graph] from http://www.cde.state.co.us/gt/download/pdf/EOY_2007-08.pdf

Identification processes which rely heavily on test scores continue to perpetuate the issue of underrepresentation. It is noted in Ford and Grantham (2003) the tests associated with gifted identification “measured familiarity with American culture and English proficiency, not intelligence” (p. 218). They go on to report that more than 90% of school districts used test scores to identify gifted learners. This leads to the assertion by Ford and Grantham, and this researcher concurs, that, “This nearly exclusive reliance on test scores keeps the demographics of gifted programs resolutely White and middle class” (p. 219).

The concept of using dynamic assessment is advocated for use in assessing diverse learners for high potential as described in a study by Carol Lidza and Sheila Macrineb (2001). They outline a process wherein the student is provided a pre-test – intervention – post-test format, suggesting this type of assessment is particularly successful with English Language Learners in discovering areas of strength and high potential (p. 76). Dynamic assessment allows the assessor to distinguish between “language difference from language deficiency” (p. 77). In a suburban district with over two-thirds of its students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, they reported an increase in the percentage of ethnic minority students identified for gifted programming using the dynamic assessment process. Previous data indicated less than one percent of ethnic minorities identified; using dynamic assessment practices, the study reported 25 of the 473 students, or five percent, were identified (p. 89).

Finally, as Ford and Grantham (2003) contend “Until deficit thinking becomes dynamic thinking, the unnecessary underrepresentation of diverse students in gifted education will continue” (p. 217).

Teacher Attitudes

Quality instructional practices at the universal level coupled with an informed teacher referral process are needed in order to realize the full potential of all learners. It is widely accepted that teacher referrals, used in conjunction with other pieces of data, play an important role in identifying gifted learners (Brown et al., 2005; Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh & Holloway, 2005; Speirs Neumeister, Adams, Pierce, Cassady & Dixon, 2007; Siegle & Powell, 2004). The point of initial referral is a critical component in utilizing the Response to Intervention framework to address the needs of high potential/highly able learners in our classrooms.

Controversy surrounds the labeling of learners as “gifted.” The RtI framework may prove to be an effective means of informing our practice in identifying and serving highly able learners without the controversial label attached. The identification process for gifted programming must serve as more than simply acquiring another label for students. Proponents of the RtI framework point out that an IQ score cannot tell you what a student can learn; rather, it can only show what a student has not yet learned (Fletcher et al., 2004). An IQ score and the labeling of a student as gifted cannot tell teachers the “what” in terms of programming. The data gathered as a part of the problem-solving process lays the foundation for effective programming to address the

strengths of the learner. These data are used to inform the instructional next steps for the teacher, as well as provide a basis from which to monitor student progress and growth.

Several studies have examined teacher attitudes with respect to referral of students for gifted identification and programming. The findings of these studies are mixed; we still do not have a clear understanding of teachers' attitudes toward gifted learners and gifted education (McCoach & Siegle, 2007). One article reported several studies investigating cultural biases that exist in identification practices for gifted programming (Elhoweris et al., 2005). The article indicated that language proficiency and ethnicity played a negative role in teacher referrals for gifted programming. The article details one troubling study which compared a European American group of students, a group labeled as African American, and a nonlabeled group of students. The study found that "Teachers were more likely to refer the nonlabeled student to a gifted and talented program than the African American student" (p. 28).

Teacher input, in the form of rating scales, has been found to increase the validity of the identification process (Jarosewich, Pfeiffer, & Morris, 2002). Teachers still hold a narrow view of what is meant by the term "gifted" and how environmental and cultural factors may affect the demonstration of high ability in low socioeconomic and culturally diverse learners (Speirs Neumeister et al., 2007). According to Siegle and Powell (2004), it is important that teachers be provided with a clear definition of both the term "gifted" and a detailed description of what constitutes gifted programming in order to make the referral relevant to the process. Without this training, teachers are left with an outdated paradigm of programming for gifted learners (Gallagher, 2000; Brown et al., 2005).

Interestingly, an article written in 1957 also addresses teacher training and attitudes toward gifted programming, finding that teachers have unfavorable views of gifted programming practices, such as grade acceleration, even with overwhelming evidence of the positive effects of this practice (Tyler, 1957).

Further research studies are needed to inform the field of gifted education in using the RtI framework as a means to mitigating the under-representation of low socioeconomic and ethnically diverse learners identified for gifted programming. A focus on effective instruction will strengthen the practices of teachers and support staff working with learners who require differentiation in order to meet their academic and social/emotional needs. Teachers require professional development to recognize the characteristics of learners from low socio economic and/or ethnic minority status who possess unrealized potential. Ongoing support from district and site-based leaders dispelling the myths about gifted learners is an essential factor in providing teachers and support staff with the resources required to inform the referral process for gifted identification, ensuring positive outcomes for all learners.

Bringing RtI and Gifted Together

The Colorado Department of Education defines Response to Intervention (RtI) as: “a framework that promotes a well-integrated system connecting general, compensatory, gifted and special education in providing high quality, standards-based instruction and intervention that is matched to students’ academic, social/emotional, and behavioral needs” (Colorado Department of Education, 2008, p. 3). In order to fully realize the potential of the framework in meeting the needs of all learners, a shift in thinking must

occur from a deficit model, to a focus on the strengths of the learner. This shift requires the understanding and support of building and district leaders, as well as classroom teachers and gifted education specialists. Hughes et al. (2009) detail the remaining challenges in implementing the RtI framework for use with gifted learners. One of the challenges they highlight speaks specifically to the aforementioned shift in thinking. They indicate “school leaders must have training and commitment to the approach as a way to scaffold learning for all learners” (p. 59).

School systems across the country have been implementing a response to intervention model or framework for several years to address the needs of struggling learners, in accordance with State and Federal law. When considering RtI’s potential to serve advanced learners, however, according to Hughes et al. (2009), “If the system is only focused on ‘struggling learners,’ then there will be a tendency to focus on the remedial needs of twice-exceptional students rather than putting a critical emphasis on their abilities” (p. 61). Creating a system wherein the needs of all learners are considered opens the door for providing appropriate instruction and differentiation matched to the needs of the individual. When discussing the model with respect to nurturing potential, Hughes et al. remind us that the field may not be ready for a change of this nature, stating: “Using an RtI model to design policy would challenge assumptions around narrow definitions and identification processes for determining who is gifted and would include the nurturing of potential as part of services” (p. 59). This idea is corroborated by Rollins, Mursky, Shah-Coltrane, and Johnsen (2009) who indicate that “Too often in our schools, outstanding potential of students is not tapped and remains hidden” (p. 22).

Further, in a webinar sponsored by the National Association for Gifted Children, Carol Ann Tomlinson, noted expert in the field of education for her work in providing teachers the tools to create and sustain a classroom designed to meet the needs of all learners indicates, “Teaching more students to function at higher levels require focused and effective attention to student variance” (NAGC Webinar, 2011). She states it even more succinctly by saying, “Differentiation aims to maximize the capacity of each learner.”

Traditional identification practices for inclusion in gifted programs have undergone change over time, yet still rely heavily on test scores. As articulated by Hughes et al. (2009), “For decades, the first step in the gifted education process was identifying who was and was not ‘gifted.’ The label became the key to services and programming” (p. 59). In order to utilize the RtI framework with advanced learners, school personnel must adjust their thinking from identifying the student to identifying and nurturing potential. As Coleman and Hughes (2009) point out “...the emphasis within RtI on early intervention or the recognition of strengths prior to formal identification reminds us of our commitment to nurture potential in all children” (p. 17).

It is promising to note in some districts and states RtI is being utilized to nurture potential and address the needs of high ability and twice-exceptional learners. For example, the Colorado definition of Response to Intervention includes gifted along side general and compensatory education. The states of Wisconsin, Ohio, and Montana also consider gifted learners in their use of the RtI framework. In discussing the implementation of the framework in North Carolina, which began utilizing the model in

2004, Brown and Abernathy (2009) indicate, “Although it originally was introduced as an alternative to eligibility determination of specific learning disabilities, schools are finding that this model enables them to look at the performance of all students.” They go on to say, “But to date, no explicit application of RtI to gifted education has occurred in North Carolina” (p. 56). When referencing how the RtI framework is currently being utilized with high ability learners in various districts and states, Rollins et al. (2009) note,

“Similarities include

- (a) differentiated instruction within the first tier,
- (b) instruction beyond grade level,
- (c) more intense services not only within the school but beyond the school setting,
- (d) a balanced assessment system, and
- (e) gifted education teachers in the decision making process.

Overall, these models emphasize that gifted students have educational needs that should be met with equally intense instruction similar to students with disabilities” (p. 28).

The implications for site-based problem-solving teams include the previously mentioned shift in thinking to include all learners when utilizing the RtI framework. Whether a student is struggling due to reading difficulties or struggling due to a lack of appropriately challenging curriculum, the framework provides the venue for collaborative problem solving to determine the next steps. According to Hughes and Rollins (2009), “For instructional purposes for both students, it would be important to know specific knowledge and skills within the curriculum for targeting instruction” (p. 32). When applying the model to the classroom setting, teachers at the universal tier provide support and differentiated instruction and monitor the progress of all students. Hughes and Rollins (2009) suggest a universal screening process that mirrors the process applied to

struggling learners. “Using a parallel structure to traditional RtI, those students who score in the top 25% could warrant extra attention, perhaps needing some additional challenges or differentiated instruction. Students in the top 5% to 10% of the class would need significantly more intensive interventions” (p. 32).

Coleman and Hughes (2009) highlight the connection with parents throughout the process, indicating, “Collaboration between the general and gifted education teachers is essential, with parents being included in the discussion of the child’s strengths and weaknesses” (p. 16). In tier II, interventions, instruction, and support are targeted to the specific needs of the learner. For a student who demonstrates potential in a specific content area, the classroom teacher and a support specialist collaborate to determine appropriate grouping, alternative assignments, and challenge opportunities. The student’s response to these opportunities is monitored and adjusted as appropriate. The third tier provides a more intense and individualized plan for the student with formalized identification as a possible outcome. This process includes a review of all available data to include input from teachers, specialists, parents, formal and informal assessments.

Collaboration is an essential component for success in meeting the needs of all learners. The RtI framework provides an effective venue for this collaborative process. As posited by Hughes and Rollins (2009), “...gifted education professionals have an opportunity to engage with special educators and general educators in a problem-solving process that can produce a coherent instructional approach, rather than the often disjointed educational patchwork that emerges with twice-exceptional learners. Similarly, such opportunities for collaboration exist for gifted English language learners

(ELL) and Title I populations” (p. 37). The authors contend further that when the framework is applied in this way, “Such instructional approaches are the antithesis of elitism; rather, it is determining appropriate instructional intervention for every child...” (p. 32). They go on to strongly advocate for a process that is inclusive of all learners when they state: “It is not recommended that students who are ahead of their peers have a separate process from students who are falling behind their peers. All members of the team should undertake the same challenge of ‘How can we assist this child in making achievement gains when the standard curriculum is not appropriate to do so?’ – whether it be a struggling child or a high-achieving child” (p. 37). To determine the readiness of school sites to incorporate the model to meet the needs of gifted learners, Rollins et al. (2009) suggest using a questionnaire to “examine the overall model, monitoring student progress, tiered levels of service, curriculum and instructional practices, and collaboration” (p. 29).

As a final note regarding the use of the Response to Intervention framework for all learners, Brown and Abernathy (2009) unequivocally state that “Unless RtI has leadership support and district and/or state policies, it will not be implemented with fidelity and will lose its potential as a framework for overall student achievement” (p. 53). With a laser focus on effective instruction at the universal, targeted, and intensive levels, teachers are becoming more astute in the collaborative practices in working with all learners who require differentiation in order to meet their academic and social/emotional needs.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Background

The linkage of general and special education efforts, particularly with respect to the disproportional over identification of ethnic minority students for special education and under identification of ethnic minority students for gifted education programming, was a focus of this study. Evidence suggests that a wider net must be cast in the search for highly able learners to mitigate for the under representation of low socio economic and ethnically diverse students in gifted education programs. The utilization of a single test score to identify students for services has come under fire, and a more comprehensive, data driven model for identification for academic services is supported widely in the field of gifted education. In order to realize a sustainable Response to Intervention framework in meeting the needs of all learners, school personnel require ongoing administrative support, embedded professional development, and dedicated time for collaborative dialogue throughout the implementation process.

Research Question

The research question at the onset of the study asked: How can the Response to Intervention framework be utilized to support the needs of all learners? In addition, two sub-questions were explored:

- a) How can the RtI framework be utilized to support the needs of gifted learners?

- b) How can the RtI framework be used to identify and support the needs of ethnic minority and low socio-economic learners for gifted programming?

Through case study analysis, an exploration of one school's processes in embedding the RtI framework school wide provided information leading to improved practices in this area.

Research Design: Case Study

Case study as a research methodology, according to Robert Yin in *Case Study Research Design and Methods* (2009), is utilized when “you want to understand a real-life phenomenon in depth, but such understanding encompasses important contextual conditions – because they were highly pertinent to your phenomenon of study” (p. 18). The contextual conditions for consideration in this case study were the essential components of the RtI framework as defined by the Colorado Department of Education (2008): leadership; curriculum and instruction; school climate and culture; problem-solving process; assessment; and family and community involvement (p. 4). Additional contextual considerations were the cultural forces of time, opportunities, routines and structures, language, modeling, interactions and relationships, physical environment, and expectations outlined by Ron Ritchhart (2002). Creswell (2007) describes a process wherein qualitative researchers “use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes” (p. 37). In an investigation of the utility of the RtI framework in meeting the needs of all learners, it is critical to understand from the school site and teacher perspective which components of the framework are a natural fit, and which must be revised in order to best serve the needs of

the learner. This investigation further studied the patterns and themes established at the study site in implementing and carrying out the RTI framework. Studies examining this phenomenon were not in the literature at the time of the study. This is a single revelatory case wherein “lessons learned” were sought from the site chosen for the study, due to this researcher’s knowledge of its successful initial implementation of the RTI process as a means to meeting the needs of all learners. This case study methodology involved:

- classroom observations of five licensed teachers,
- interviews with five licensed teachers and the school principal,
- observation and dialogue with the eight member site-based Problem-Solving Team (PST) to discern those actions leading to positive outcomes on behalf of students brought to the team for discussion; and
- a focus group comprised of the site principal, teachers and problem-solving team members to provide additional detail and context to the findings.

These components are fully described below.

The researcher developed a series of questions to serve as a guide throughout the research process:

- What are the genuine questions the study seeks to answer?
- What are the types of measures that will answer those questions?
- How will an ongoing analysis of the data inform next steps?
- How will necessary adjustments be made along the way?
- What action will result from the findings of the study?

The first two questions encompass the research question and sub-questions as well as the matrices and protocols (Appendices A, B, and C) developed to gather data

throughout the study. The remaining three questions were used as the data gathering process was underway, and also informed the analysis of the findings and recommendations for future study.

Yin (2009) suggests a distinguishing factor for case study research is the collection and analysis phases when working with qualitative data. As such, case studies rely on “multiple sources of evidence, with data needing to converge in a triangulating fashion” (p. 18). No empirical studies have been conducted regarding the utility of the RtI framework and high potential learners. This particular study, then, was reliant upon the ability to be agile in allowing the initial data gathering to more fully inform next steps in the process. For this reason, the questions to be answered benefited from the case study design in that, according to Yin, “...case study plans change as a result of the initial data collection, and you are encouraged to consider these flexibilities – if used properly and without bias – to be an advantage of the case study method” (p. 90).

This study was conducted in three phases, taking full advantage of the agility in allowing the initial data gathering to inform next steps.

Table 3

Phases of the Study

Source	Phase I	Phase II	Phase III
Observations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classrooms • Problem-Solving Team Document Teacher and PST practices		
Interviews		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers • Principal • Problem-Solving Team Contextualize observed practices and document emergent themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus Group Solidify overall impressions and themes garnered in phases I and II

In phase one of the study, the observation phase, protocols were utilized to guide the researcher in documenting classroom and Problem-Solving Team practices instrumental in meeting the needs of all learners. The data gathered in phase one was used in phase two, the interview phase, in order to further contextualize themes noted during the observations and to refine the interview questions posed to teacher participants, the principal, and the problem-solving team participants. Phase three utilized the data gleaned from the one-on-one teacher interviews and Problem-Solving Team interviews to discern emergent themes and shape the process for a focus group, providing additional context and depth of understanding.

Statement of Bias for Research Purposes

As a long time educator, I have been responsible for leadership and oversight in several areas of student programming and services in the district where the study was completed. The identification of the potential case study sites was based on my knowledge of effective implementation practices of Response to Intervention coupled

with deep knowledge of the district's elementary schools in utilizing the essential elements of the RtI framework to meet the needs of all learners. Researcher bias was controlled through careful application of the case study procedures outlined in this chapter. The research design incorporated multiple forms of data and a clearly delineated process for identifying themes and patterns.

Sample School and Participants

Site selection. This selective case study was comprised of one neighborhood elementary school site in a suburban school district in Colorado. Five schools were identified as possible study sites in order to ensure a sufficient number of volunteers at a single site for participation in the teacher observations and interviews. My day-to-day work with building leaders and teachers in several areas of the district's programming informed the identification of the five possible sites. The five schools were identified and ranked as possible study sites based on the following three characteristics: strong leadership commitment to the RtI process, an established RtI process involving all grade levels, and specific programming for gifted learners. One school at a time was approached until a site with the sufficient number of participants was identified. The sites were ranked and then approached for participation based on the researcher's existing knowledge of the school's effective Response to Intervention processes and a willingness and excitement to participate in the study expressed by the site's principal.

Participant selection. The principal, teacher subjects and Problem-Solving Team members at the first site were invited to participate voluntarily in the case study, after an introductory e-mail communication and follow up informational meeting for interested

potential participants. The informational meeting included an outline of the process and timeline for observations and interviews and anticipated commitment on the part of the participants was discussed. At the close of the meeting, the principal, eight problem-solving team members and five individual teachers volunteered to participate allowing the researcher to designate this school as the final case study site. All individuals were given an appropriate consent letter at the close of the meeting. Original signed copies were sent to the researcher prior to conducting the research and participants retained a signed copy for their records (Appendix D).

Site Administrator

The principal had been in education for 19 years and the leader at the study site for five years. The principal played an integral role in overseeing programming for all students at the site, and his leadership was instrumental in ensuring a school-wide approach to the RtI framework, focusing on meeting the needs of all learners. For example, his value for meeting the needs of all learners was evidenced by utilizing site-based monies to fund a Response to Intervention specialist to support staff in providing appropriate interventions. The RtI specialist also oversaw gifted programming at the site. In addition, his use of support staff to meet the needs of learners, with or without a gifted or special education label had been noted for a number of years.

Teacher Participants

The participant sample for classroom observations and one-on-one interviews included five licensed teachers in both primary and intermediate grade levels. The teachers approached were classroom teachers with at least three successful years of

classroom teaching experience allowing them to provide a historical perspective of the implementation of the RtI framework over time.

Teacher A had been a teacher for 27 years and worked at the study site for 2 years, and at the time of the study taught Kindergarten. She spent the 25 years prior to joining the staff at the study site teaching early childhood special education. Her experience with RtI included participation on a committee responsible for planning the district wide implementation of the framework during the 2005-2006 school year.

Teacher B had been an educator for 20 years and worked at the study site for 12 years, teaching First Grade at the time of the study. Teacher B also had experience teaching 2nd and 4th grades as well as background as a Reading Specialist. Teacher B had been involved in the formal implementation of the RtI framework in the district and at the study site for over 5 years, and was a member of the study site's problem-solving team for 12 years. Teacher C had taught for 12 years and worked at the study site for one year, teaching First Grade at the time of the study. She had experience teaching grades 2 and 4, as well as middle level mathematics and reading. Teacher C reported that her experience with the RtI framework had been strengthened since she started teaching at the study site. Teacher D had been a teacher for eight years and had worked at the study site for six years, teaching Second and Third Grades during the study. Teacher D's career focused on grades two and three during her eight years of experience. Her knowledge and experience with RtI was strengthened by her role as team leader; in that role, she was responsible for the communication regarding student data and problem-solving team meetings. Teacher E had been a teacher for four years and worked at the

study site for all of those years, teaching Fifth Grade. Teacher E's background with the implementation of the RtI framework was shaped by his work at the study site. Teacher E reported that the RtI framework is a natural way of teaching, with targeted interventions provided for students who need it.

Problem-Solving Team

The school's Problem-Solving Team (PST) consisted of nine staff members including the principal, Building Resource Teacher, RtI Specialist, counselor/social worker and five members of the licensed teaching staff. The five additional staff members included specialists in English as a Second Language (ESL), Special Education, as well as a First Grade, Fourth Grade, and Fifth Grade teacher. The Building Resource Teacher served as the facilitator of the meetings; the facilitator role included introducing the students to be discussed as well as focusing the members to ensure the meeting was productive and conducted within the allotted time frame. The team met three to four times per month for 50 minutes each session. The goal of the PST meetings was to collaboratively problem solve possible interventions to address concerns brought to the team regarding individual students.

Focus Group

A focus group comprised of two of the five classroom teachers, three problem-solving team members, and the site administrator was also convened to provide further clarification, depth and insight to the findings, as well so to get a sense for the overall attitudes regarding the utility of RtI for all learners at the study site. Members of the focus group were selected as a representative sample of the classroom teacher

participants and PST participants. Specific questions were asked to corroborate common themes as well as to explore outlier elements that emerged throughout the classroom observations, one-on-one interviews, Problem-Solving Team observation and PST interview phases. This process is described more fully, below.

Instrumentation

Classroom observations. According to Creswell (2007), data collection in case study research draws on “multiple sources of information, such as observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials” (p. 75). For this study, each of the five individual classrooms were observed one time for 30 to 45 minutes in duration. Observations took place during the month of September, noting the cultural forces introduced by Ritchhart (2002) to elicit optimal learning opportunities and make thinking visible for all learners. These included time, opportunities, routines and structures, language, modeling, interactions and relationships, physical environment, and expectations. These elements are noted on the classroom observation protocol (see Appendix A). Specifics within these broad categories and the documentation of common elements and themes are described more fully in the data analysis section.

Problem-solving team observations. Two 50 minute observations of the site’s Problem-Solving Team Process meetings were conducted during the months of October and December. An observation form (Appendix A, *Problem-Solving Team Observation*) noted the physical environment, interactions and relationships, process, and language/expectations (Ritchhart, 2002). Specific components of each element and the documentation of common themes are described in detail in the data analysis section.

Interviews. The interview and data analysis procedure utilized what Yin (2009) refers to as the relevant questions which can occur at any of five levels (p. 87).

- Level 1: Questions asked of specific participants
- Level 2: Questions asked of the case itself
- Level 3: Questions asked of the patterns of findings
- Level 4: Questions asked of the study itself
- Level 5: Questions regarding broader implications of the study

Level 1 questions were posed during the interviews as noted below, while level 2 and 3 questions were used to guide data analysis in Chapter 4. Questions categorized as level 4 were used to inform the discussion of the findings in Chapter 5 and level 5 questions guided the discourse for implications of the study and future recommendations.

Table 4:

Level 1: Questions asked of specific participants

Target	Questions
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about your background knowledge of RtI (when/how you first became aware of the framework; over time, how implementation of the process has taken shape in your classroom, etc.). • Describe how you determine what your students know and are able to do. • What do you identify as the most important aspect in identifying a student for gifted programming? • What do you identify as the greatest challenges in meeting the needs of the advanced learners in your classroom? • Talk about how you differentiate instruction for the advanced learners in your classroom. • Additional follow up questions.
Principal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about parent satisfaction and involvement at your site. • What are you looking for as you observe in classrooms? • When initially implementing the RtI framework, how did you “sell” the staff as to its merits? • How has the PST process changed conversations among staff at your site? • How does the PST process differ for high ability learners versus struggling learners? • Describe the greatest challenges in using this process to identify the needs of advanced learners? • What do you identify as the greatest promise in using PST data to serve the needs of advanced learners? • What is your greatest celebration as the leader of this school?
PST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has the PST process changed conversations among staff at your site? • How does the PST process differ for high ability learners versus struggling learners? • Describe the greatest challenges in using this process to identify the needs of advanced learners? • What do you identify as the greatest promise in using PST data to serve the needs of advanced learners?
Focus Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk about how the RtI framework has changed conversations about students at this school. • Describe how the staff at this school approaches meeting the needs of all learners. • How has the environment established by leadership guided the staff in moving through the challenges of using this process to meet the needs of high potential learners • Talk about how the collaborative nature of this staff allows for the process to be strength-based and appropriate for meeting the needs of high potential learners. • What additional thoughts and ideas do you want to be sure I capture?

Table 5

Level 2: Questions asked of the case itself, not of individual participants

Target	Question
Observation and interview data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did the observations and interviews say about the site’s use of the RtI framework in general? • What did the observations and interviews say about the use of the framework as a strength-based model? • Does the model change when considering advanced learners, and if so, how? • What role does leadership play in ensuring effective implementation for all learners?

Table 6

Level 3: Questions asked of the pattern of findings

Target	Question
All data sources (observation notes, interview notes and transcriptions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the pattern of findings suggest commonalities between data gathered during the classroom and PST observations and the responses during the interviews? • Did the pattern suggest additional follow up questions to be explored with a focus group?

Table 7

Level 4: Questions asked of the study itself

Target	Question
All data sources (observation notes, interview notes and transcriptions)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was the RtI framework effective with all learners? • Was it effective with high potential learners? • If so, what adjustments has this site made in order to enhance the process to include all learners? • What has this site determined as potential issues in implementation? • How are the findings connected to the research?

Table 8

Level 5: Questions regarding broader implications of the study

Target	Question
Analysis of all data sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the findings transferable? • Did the findings support the use of an RtI framework with high potential/highly able learners district wide? • Were the findings such that a change in practices for identifying gifted learners should be explored by the district? • Has the study provided insight into the underrepresentation of ethnic minority and low SES students in gifted programming?

Teacher interviews: level 1. The Level 1 questions (See Appendix B), asked of specific participants, included a set of pre-determined questions crafted prior to the onset of the study. These questions were purposeful in exploring the research question and sub-questions regarding the utility of the RtI framework with all learners. Clarifying and probing questions stemming from the observation of the classrooms and Problem-Solving Teams were also included in the interview sessions. The pre-determined questions and prompts included:

- Tell me about your background knowledge of RtI (when/how you first became aware of the framework; over time, how implementation of the process has taken shape in your classroom, etc.).
- Describe how you determine what your students know and are able to do.
- What do you identify as the most important aspect in identifying a student for gifted programming?
- What do you identify as the greatest challenges in meeting the needs of the advanced learners in your classroom?

- Talk about how you differentiate instruction for the advanced learners in your classroom.
- Additional follow up questions.

Interviews were conducted with each of the five teachers to explore their use of the RtI framework in meeting the needs of all learners, with specific emphasis on the framework's utility with advanced and high potential learners. The interviews took place during the month of October during the school day in the site's private, closed conference room. Each interview was 30 to 45 minutes in length. The interviews were digitally recorded and notes were later transcribed by the researcher from the recordings via multiple listenings. At the close of the interview session, the researcher shared common themes documented during the classroom observation, offering participants the opportunity to clarify or add context to the researcher's notes. A member check meeting was scheduled for December to ensure accuracy of the researcher's rendering of the interview sessions. The analysis procedures are described in detail in the data analysis section.

Principal interview: level 1. An interview with the principal was conducted in December. The formal protocol (Appendix B) was developed based on the classroom observations, teacher interviews and PST observations. The purpose of the interview was to get this leader's insights into the use of the framework, and the essential components of the process that make it successful with the staff at his school. These questions and prompts included:

- Talk about parent satisfaction and involvement at your site.
- What are you looking for as you observe in classrooms?

- When initially implementing the RtI framework, how did you “sell” the staff as to its merits?
- How has the PST process changed conversations among staff at your site?
- How does the PST process differ for high ability learners versus struggling learners?
- Describe the greatest challenges in using this process to identify the needs of advanced learners?
- What do you identify as the greatest promise in using PST data to serve the needs of advanced learners?
- What is your greatest celebration as the leader of this school?

The session, held in the principal’s office, was digitally recorded and notes were later transcribed by the researcher via multiple listenings. At the close of the interview session, a member check meeting was scheduled one week later to ensure accuracy of the researcher’s rendering of the interview. The method for documentation and analysis of common elements and themes emerging from this interview are described in detail in the data analysis section.

Problem-solving team interview: level 1. An interview with the eight Problem-Solving Team (PST) members was held in December in the school’s conference room. The 50 minute session was set up in a discussion format, with participants encouraged to speak one at a time to ensure accuracy of responses and to self-monitor participation to ensure one person’s voice was not dominating the discussion. The purpose of this interview was to further explore the current practices observed in utilizing the RtI framework to meet the needs of all learners, with a specific focus on gifted learners.

The Level 1 initial questions and prompts (See Appendix B) explored with the PST included:

- How has the PST process changed conversations among staff at your site?
- How does the PST process differ for high ability learners versus struggling learners?
- Describe the greatest challenges in using this process to identify the needs of advanced learners?
- What do you identify as the greatest promise in using PST data to serve the needs of advanced learners?

The interview was digitally recorded and notes were later transcribed by the researcher via multiple listenings. At the close of the interview session, a member check meeting was scheduled for January to ensure accuracy of the researcher's rendering of the interview. The documentation and analysis methods of common elements and themes emerging from this interview are described in detail in the data analysis section.

Focus group session: level 1. Finally, a focus group of participants was convened for the purpose of discussing and clarifying themes from the previous observations and interviews. According to the New York State Teacher Centers (2008):

Focus groups are a method of group interviewing in which the interaction between the moderator and the group, as well as the interaction between group members, serves to elicit information and insights in response to carefully designed questions. The dynamic nature of the questions asked by the moderator and the group process, produces a level of insight that is rarely derived from 'unidirectional' information collection devices such as observation, surveys and less interactional interview techniques (Focus Groups, Introduction section, para. 1).

The significance for using a focus group in this case study was to take advantage of the dynamic nature of the process and get at a level and depth of information that

would not have been possible without the interaction of the group. The process used for the focus group session was to craft questions derived from the classroom observations, one-on-one interviews, Problem-Solving Team observation and interviews, and the principal interview; use those questions to generate discussion among group members regarding the RtI process; and come to a shared understanding of the utility of the framework for all learners at the study site. The focus group session took place in January in the conference room at the school site. The 60 minute session was set up in a discussion format, with participants encouraged to speak one at a time and asked to self-monitor participation to ensure one person's voice was not dominating the discussion. The researcher acted as facilitator, moderating and re-focusing the group, as necessary. The discussion was initiated with the statement: Talk about how the RtI framework has changed conversations about students at this school. After each member had a chance to respond, the researcher transitioned the group to elicit more specific information as to the utilization of the RtI framework for all learners. General questions during the session included:

- Describe how the staff at this school approaches meeting the needs of all learners.
- How has the environment established by leadership guided the staff in moving through the challenges of using this process meet the needs of high potential learners?
- Talk about how the collaborative nature of this staff allows for the process to be strength-based and appropriate for meeting the needs of high potential learners.
- What additional thoughts and ideas do you want to be sure I capture?

In essence, the focus group was asked to define what is working in the process and what needs to be adjusted and refined (See Appendix B). In order to ensure all information was captured accurately and that the researcher did not inadvertently filter out any responses, the focus group session was digitally recorded, transcribed by the researcher via multiple listenings. Participants responded one at a time to pre-determined questions emerging from the classroom observations, PST observations, one-on-one interviews, PST interview, and the principal interview. At the close of the focus group session a member check meeting was scheduled to ensure accuracy of the researcher's rendering of the session. The documentation of the focus group's corroboration and further illumination of the common elements and themes emerging from the classroom observations and interviews, PST observations and interview, and principal interview are described in detail in the data analysis section.

Data Analysis Procedures

The main unit of analysis in this study was observation and interview data regarding the utility of the RtI framework in meeting the needs of all learners. Stake (1995) puts case study data analysis into perspective by stating, "With intrinsic case studies, our primary task is to come to understand the case. It will help us to tease out relationships, probe issues, and to aggregate categorical data, but those ends are subordinate to understanding the case" (p. 77). He suggests extensive pre-planning to include an organizational framework at the onset of the study. An organizational structure in place at the start of the study provided the banks of the river, ensuring a focus for the data gathering, analysis, and logical flow in reporting the findings.

Analysis of the qualitative data gathered throughout the study served to contextualize the findings. Many forms exist for the analysis and interpretation of the data: categorical aggregation, direct interpretation, patterns, and naturalistic generalizations (Stake, 1995, p. 74-85; Creswell, 2007, p. 163). Creswell also advocates for a detailed description of the facts. The case study described herein utilized all of these forms (Appendices A and B) in an effort to make meaning of the processes and procedures at the school site. Observation and interview data were categorically aggregated as patterns emerged throughout the process. Direct interpretation and generalizations were also gleaned from the observation and interview data, as well as via notes from the follow up member check contact with participants. A detailed description of the facts was used to pull the data points from all sources together as described in Chapter 5.

The forms used with classroom and Problem-Solving Team observations and the excerpts from the recorded interviews of the individual teachers, principal and focus group were designed to document best practices in implementing and using the RtI framework in meeting the needs of all learners (Coleman & Hughes, 2009; CDE, 2008). The data gathered in these formats were analyzed in order to determine global patterns and themes. Data matrices capturing the emergent patterns and elements (Appendix C) were designed to aggregate and analyze the collective data. The content analysis format for each is described below.

Proportionality data with respect to identification of gifted learners is gathered yearly by all districts in the state of Colorado for the purposes of examining proportional

identification. The number and percent of students identified are reported by grade level, by gender, and in five categories of ethnicity: Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native American and White. These existing data, which reflect traditional gifted identification practices, were compared to district and school site proportionality data. This secondary unit of analysis, coupled with observation and interview data gathered throughout the study, was examined to provide context to the teacher perception data regarding the RtI process in meeting the needs of all learners, and specifically with respect to identifying high potential/highly able learners.

Classroom observations. Classroom observations were conducted to get a bird's eye view of the structures, environment, climate and culture conducive to meeting the needs of all learners. Notes taken during the observation period were typed directly on the Classroom Observation protocol (Appendix A) for each of the five classroom observations. The observation form included eight cultural forces (Ritchhart, 2002), including time, opportunities, routines and structures, language, modeling, interactions and relationships, physical environment, and expectations:

Table 9

Classroom Observations

Cultural Forces	Elements to Document
Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are given time to process instructions • Ample time is given to allow for depth of thought and responses
Opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are afforded thinking opportunities • Students are provided the opportunity to discuss ideas
Routines and Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The classroom routines are clearly established • The structure of the classroom allows for individual differences
Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers and students use language that is descriptive • Teachers and students use language that is reflective
Modeling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The teacher uses modeling to reinforce the idea of making thinking visible • The classroom norm is to share thinking aloud
Interactions and Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration is evident throughout the instructional learning cycle • A relationship of shared learning is evident between teacher and student as well as student to student
Physical Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The classroom includes visible examples of students' thinking • The classroom is arranged in a way that is conducive to small group and individual instructional opportunities
Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Expectations are clearly delineated • Classroom expectations include going beyond rote memorization

An observation form (see Appendix A) was used to document the cultural forces elements. Where an observed element or pattern was noted more than once, that element

was highlighted and named. Themes emerging from the common elements were noted on the Observation Data Matrix (Appendix C) at the conclusion of the observations. Any element that seemed particularly noteworthy due to its unique nature or exclusivity was also noted.

Teacher interviews. Interviews with teachers, utilizing an interview protocol developed by the researcher (Appendix B), were digitally recorded; through multiple listenings, the interviews were transcribed by the researcher, and common elements and patterns were identified and named. Individual follow up meetings were scheduled to conduct a member check ensuring the researcher's conclusions were consistent with the participant's intent. Where an element or pattern was noted more than once, that element was highlighted. Themes emerging from the common elements were noted on the Interview Data Matrix (Appendix C) at the conclusion of the interview. Any element that seemed particularly noteworthy due to its unique nature or exclusivity was also noted.

Problem-solving team observations. Problem-Solving Team meetings were observed, with notes typed on the observation protocol (Appendix A) for each PST observation. Utilizing a number of the cultural forces from Ritchhart (2002) and the researcher's knowledge of the RtI process, elements noted during the PST observations included physical environment, interactions and relationships, process, and language and expectations. More specifically:

Table 10

Problem-Solving Team Observations

Cultural Forces	Elements to Document
Physical Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The meeting room is conducive to collaboration with participants seated around a conference table • Student data is projected on a large screen, clearly visible to all • The facilitator documents conversation on a laptop computer, entering dates and interventions in the district’s data management system
Interactions and Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitator monitors the meeting process • Teachers present a brief synopsis of the specific concern, data, and strategies used prior to the meeting
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time • Opportunities • Modeling
Language/Expectations in relation to the RtI Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three-tiered Instructional model • Assessment and Screening • Data Driven • Progress Monitoring • Family Partnerships • Fidelity of Implementation

Items observed in more than one team meeting constituted a common element. Themes emerging from the common elements were noted on the problem-solving team Observation Data Matrix (Appendix C) at the conclusion of the observations.

Principal interview. An interview with the site’s principal was digitally recorded, and through multiple listenings, the interview was transcribed by the researcher. The

formal protocol for this interview (Appendix B) was developed with questions based on the classroom observations, teacher interviews, and PST observations. A follow up member check meeting was scheduled with the principal to ensure the researcher's conclusions were consistent with the participant's intent. Themes emerging from the common elements were compared to the Teacher and Problem-Solving Team observation and interview matrices (Appendix C) at the conclusion of the interview. Any element that seemed particularly noteworthy due to its unique nature or exclusivity was also noted.

Problem-solving team interview. An interview (see Appendix B) with members of the Problem-Solving Team was digitally recorded; through multiple listenings, the interview was transcribed by the researcher. A follow up meeting was scheduled to conduct a member check to ensure the researcher's conclusions were consistent with the participants' intent. Common elements were coded; themes emerging from the common elements were noted on the Interview Data Matrix (Appendix C) at the conclusion of the interview. Any element that seemed particularly noteworthy due to its unique nature or exclusivity was also noted.

Focus group session. A set of general focus group questions were developed (Appendix B) at the onset of the case study, with additional questions explored based on the classroom observations, teacher interviews, PST observation and PST interview sessions. Analysis of the data consisted of what the New York State Teacher Centers (2008) refer to as, "gathering impressions from listening to the session and or tapes of the session along with reviewing notes taken during the session..." The focus group

interview was digitally recorded; through multiple listenings, the interview was transcribed by the researcher, common elements and patterns confirming or in contrast to previous findings noted on the Teacher and Problem-Solving Team observation and interview data matrices (Appendix C) and the principal interview notes. A member-check with focus group participants was conducted to ensure the researcher's over all impressions were consistent with the focus group's intent.

Pattern of Findings

Patterns in use of common terminology, classroom practices, instructional strategies and the use of data to inform instruction were captured via the Observation and Interview Data Matrices (Appendix C). Common terms and synonyms were highlighted and noted if mentioned more than once. Themes for each of the sources of information were designated prominent if highlighted at least three times. Elements of contrast or uniqueness were circled and noted for further exploration.

As mentioned previously, gifted ethnicity data is reported yearly to the state of Colorado. This data was obtained via the Colorado Department of Education website and compared to the district and study site gifted ethnicity data. District and site-based data was available to the researcher through the district's database system. The data was examined to determine whether any differences in proportionality of identified gifted learners were apparent at the study site.

Timeframe for the Study

During the months of June and July 2010, the five sites were determined and the site principals were contacted. Informational meetings were set up at the five initial sites

in the month of August 2010. The final site was selected and the participants at the site were determined. Participants were made aware of the details of the study and signed a form indicating understanding of the study and agreement to participate.

From September through December 2010, the classrooms of the five teacher participants were observed; after each observation, the one-on-one interview was scheduled and digitally recorded using pre-determined questions as well as follow up questions from the classroom observations. After each interview, a time was scheduled for a follow up conversation to ensure consistency of participant and researcher understanding. Problem-Solving Team meetings were observed and a follow up interview with team members was scheduled to ensure consistency of participant and researcher understanding. In the month of December, an interview was also conducted with the site principal.

In January, a follow up meeting with the site's principal was conducted to ensure accuracy of intent. Also during the month of January, a focus group was convened to discuss themes from prior observations and interviews. The focus group also discussed what was currently working in using the RtI framework to meet the needs of all learners and what areas still need to be refined. A follow up member check was conducted to ensure consistency of participant and researcher understanding.

In February, district and school ethnicity data were gathered and examined with regard to proportionality of gifted learners. The data gathered from all sources was analyzed in concert with State ethnicity data for gifted learners and included in the

analysis for context. Additional follow up with the site's principal was conducted to clarify lingering questions.

Limitations

Findings of this study are not generalizable to other teachers, sites, or districts as the data is specific to this particular site, with these teachers, and this administrative leadership. The purpose of the study was not to generalize; rather it was to provide a "lessons learned" context for districts and sites to examine within the context of their own unique environments. In addition, the researcher's role in the district and relationship with the school site personnel is noted as an area of potential bias.

Summary

This case study was intended to add research to best practices relative to the research question and sub-questions regarding the utilization of the Response to Intervention framework. Observations of classrooms and PST meetings, interviews with teachers, administration, PST members, and a focus group provided context for the study by taking a focused look at one elementary school's processes and practices in implementing RtI school-wide in meeting the needs of all learners.

Chapter Four: Findings

This study set out to explore the utility of the Response to Intervention framework in meeting the needs of all learners, with a lens for using the framework with high ability and high potential learners. The stated research question was: How can the Response to Intervention framework be utilized to support the needs of all learners? In addition, two sub-questions were explored:

- a) How can the RtI framework be utilized to support the needs of gifted learners?
- b) How can the RtI framework be used to identify and support the needs of ethnic minority and low socio-economic learners for gifted programming?

Yin's five levels of questions (2009, p. 87) provided the interview and data analysis framework for this study. Findings will be firstly reported here by Yin's level of questions and then analyzed in Chapter 5 by theme and patterns presented. Table 11 is included to provide the source of the findings, followed by narrative lending detailed support.

Table 11

Observation and Interview Data

Questions	Data Source	Data Gathering Tool
<p>Level 2:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What did the observations and interviews tell me about the site’s use of the RtI framework in general? • What did the observations and interviews tell me about the use of the framework as a strength-based model? • Does the model change when considering advanced learners, and if so, how? • What role does leadership play in ensuring effective implementation for all learners? 	Classroom Observations	<p>Ritchhart’s Cultural Forces: (Appendix A) Time Opportunities Routines and Structures Language Modeling Interactions and Relationships Physical environment Expectations</p>
	Teacher Interviews	Teacher Interview Questions: (Appendix B)
	PST Observations	Observation Protocol: (Appendix A) Physical Environment Interactions and Relationships Process RtI Components
	Principal Interview	Principal Interview Questions: (Appendix B)
	PST Interview	PST Interview Questions: (Appendix B)
	Focus Group	Focus Group Questions: (Appendix B)

Observation and Interview Data

Level 2 questions were those asked of the case itself, not of individual participants. The final questions stemmed from the initial review of observation and interview data gathered:

- What did the observations and interviews say about the site's use of the RtI framework in general?
- What did the observations and interviews say about the use of the framework as a strength-based model?
- Does the model change when considering advanced learners, and if so, how?
- What role does leadership play in ensuring effective implementation for all learners?

The findings for these four questions are considered in depth, with support from data gathered in each of the observation and interview sessions.

What did the observations and interviews tell me about the site's use of the RtI framework in general?

Classroom observations. The five classroom observations provided rich detail into the teachers' use of the universal classroom setting and targeted interventions in meeting the needs of all learners. Several examples were documented using Ritchhart's (2002) cultural forces of time; opportunities; routines and structures; language; modeling; interactions and relationships; physical environment and expectations as the organizational framework for the observations.

Time: Students were given time to process instructions and ample time was given to allow for depth of thought and responses. In all classrooms observed, students were

given specific, step-by-step instructions allowing them not only time to process the instructions, but to formulate a response or carry out the assignment with more depth and complexity. In addition, prior to full group discussion, younger students were observed engaging in pre-reading. This was purposeful on the part of the teachers, providing students with time to develop their thoughts beyond a one or two word answer. For example, Teacher A encouraged students to go deeper by asking, “Look at that man. What do you think he’s doing?” Teacher B stated “Let’s think about this before you write it out on paper.” Students were given time to reflect and make connections from the reading of the day. They were encouraged to make connections to a story they had read previously or to something they had experienced in their own lives, allowing for purposeful discussion and adding meaning to the daily shared reading.

Opportunities: Students were afforded thinking opportunities and provided the opportunity to discuss ideas. Thinking opportunities and time for discussion was valued as a high priority in engaging the students in all classrooms observed. Through questioning, teachers gave students multiple opportunities to think and share those thoughts with each other. In Teacher C’s classroom, it was noted that new words were treated as a discovery, with students asked to make connections. Every student in the small group setting was given the opportunity to respond when asked what he or she would like to paint and why. When discussing the word “wrapped” in Teacher D’s class, the discussion was prefaced by indicating, “There are two words that sound like wrapped. What do you think this one means?” One student responded, “wrap, like wrapping a present.” Another response was “rap on the door, like knocking.” Another student

joined the discussion and added, “there’s rap music.” This exchange was indicative of the opportunities observed throughout the classroom visits. Students were encouraged to read the story silently, and promised the opportunity later that morning to talk about the connections they made.

Routines and structures: Classroom routines are clearly established and the structure of the classroom allows for individual differences. Classrooms were organized with clearly established routines, maximizing the time for learning. For example, students in Teacher A’s classroom knew that it was “tub time,” who the “captains” were, and the structure and expectations for this time. In Teacher C’s classroom, students were clearly accustomed to working independently while the teacher worked with a small group. At the ring of the bell, students moved efficiently and quietly to the next center.

Small group instruction was a common occurrence in all classrooms observed at the study site. Scaffolding was routinely provided for students who needed additional support, while students who were ready for more challenge, depth, and complexity were afforded the opportunity to extend their learning. In Teacher B’s classroom, for example, the small group was instructed to “dictate it to me so I can check your spelling,” with the teacher helping students who struggled in this area. Opportunity for student choice was observed in all classrooms, as well. Teacher E’s class included an example of the opportunities provided for content extension, with the class divided into multiple reading groups, allowing for those most advanced readers to connect with appropriately leveled novels or stories from the Junior Great Books anthologies.

Language: Teachers and students use language that is descriptive and reflective.

By asking questions like, “How do you think that made him feel?” and “What do you notice?” teachers encouraged students to respond in ways that were descriptive and evidenced by reflective thought. Teacher C, for example, indicated to her class: “There is a big word on page 11, ‘bellowed.’ You might not know what that means.” She then read the passage, using the word in context, and asked, “What do you think it means?” The students immediately responded, “yelled!” Again, in Teacher C’s classroom, students were encouraged to use descriptive language and give reflective responses with questioning such as, “What do you think that means?”; “How is his face different here?”; “How did you get that it was Toby on page 3?”; and “Let’s see what happens next!” Throughout this period, students were encouraged to go beyond one word answers and provide responses that incorporated language to describe their thoughts fully.

Modeling: Teachers use modeling to reinforce visible thinking and to share thinking out loud. Questions were posed in such a way that teachers encouraged students to articulate their thinking out loud in an atmosphere of shared discussion. For example, Teacher A’s class was reading a story about things that are frightening. The teacher engaged the students by indicating she was frightened by snakes, but spiders did not make her scared at all. When it was time to write about what made the students frightened, Teacher A wrote her sentence first, stating it aloud as she wrote. This provided students a model for sharing their thinking out loud, and the conversation was rich with examples of scary things.

Interactions and relationships: Shared learning is evident through collaboration as well as the teacher to student and student to student relationships. Several examples illustrated the teachers' value for relationships with and among their students. Teacher C, for example, used words like, "Let's look together and see..." then the group shared ideas of the story together. Students interacted with Teacher C and each other in a way that demonstrated relationships were established early on in the school year. Tuesday as "fix it day" for Spelling was an established norm in the classroom. Teacher C stated: "I see four mistakes. What are they? This is independent work for now; don't tell your friend!" When talking about an aspect of the story, Teacher C asked, "Do you like to paint? What do you like to paint?" She allowed for each student to share what they liked, further deepening the relationships in her classroom. In Teacher D's classroom, collaboration and shared learning was also evident throughout the observation. Students were continually having a dialogue with the teacher about the chapter: what happened in the story and why.

Physical environment: Classroom includes visible examples of student's thinking and arrangement is conducive to small group and individual instructional opportunities. Each classroom observed was arranged in a way that allowed a continuum of learners the opportunity to learn and grow at their optimal level. Classroom A had a shared writing area, floor space for group work, and a small group area for reading with the teacher. Classroom B displayed their "First Grade Promise" with all students signing and agreeing to the promise. This classroom was filled with books to consult for ideas, with Teacher B encouraging students to look for these if they got stuck in their writing process.

Classroom C incorporated a reading/writing center, a computer area, and side tables throughout the room. The desks were arranged in pods to allow for small group work, with the writing and reading area on the floor. Teacher C moved from group to group to maximize the instructional time and opportunities. Examples of shared writing were visibly displayed on the walls and on large paper charts in Teacher D's classroom. The environment was such that desks were arranged in the middle with open areas all around the edges of the classroom. Small groups and individuals were spread around the room for the purposes of instruction. While one small group worked with Teacher D, some students worked on the floor, others at desks. Teacher E's walls included a chart with student-generated examples of pride related to the site's mascot and Positive Behavior Support (PBS) systems, as well as several examples of student work. The room was arranged stadium or auditorium style, with a work area for small group discussions.

Expectations: Classroom expectations are clear and go beyond rote memorization. Teachers in the study set clear expectations for the learning and management aspects of their classroom. Day-to-day classroom management and student discipline was not an area of concern noted in any of the classrooms visited. The norms of behavior and routine tasks were clearly established, allowing for optimal learning. Misbehavior issues were not observed; rather, teachers used what might have been an issue of concern as an opportunity to connect with the students and to encourage learning. Several examples bore this out. In Teacher B's classroom, students knew to go to an area of the room to write, and knew the expectation for productive writing during this time. Other examples include teachers asking questions such as, "How are we supposed to be

in reading?” and “Who can help you right now?” signaling student ownership for behavior.

The expectation for learning in all observed classrooms was set high. Teachers continually brought the learning to a new level, never asking for a simple one word or rote memorization answer. This questioning, taken from the observation notes in Classroom E, is indicative of the high level of expectations:

Why are you reading that one? What are you trying to get out of it? Why do you have an interest in reading it, though? (Teacher E was pushing beyond simple answers.) Are you going to be able to do anything with that reading when you are done with it? A write up? Your own invention? Just reading for enjoyment?

This questioning regarding the student’s choice of magazine during independent reading was done in a way that encouraged the student to select appropriate material as well as pushed him to go beyond simply reading during the allotted reading time. This example is shared as a representative sample of expectations observed in all participant classrooms. Examples of simple question and answer were not noted by this observer.

These examples were only a fraction of what was observed in each classroom; these classrooms were only a fraction of the classrooms at the study site. Given the consistency of the cultural forces observed in these classrooms, the general RtI framework was clearly embedded in the day-to-day structure of the school.

Problem-solving team observations. The two Problem-Solving Team (PST) observations were illustrative of the site’s consistent and effective use of the key components of the RtI framework. The observations keyed in on the physical environment of the meeting space, interactions and relationships of the PST members, process of the meeting, and the RtI components specifically addressed. The examples

shared below provide documentation of the PST's knowledge and effective use of the process.

Physical environment. The PST meetings were held in the site's conference room. The members were seated around an oval-shaped table; the facilitator was not at the "head" of the table. A poster on the wall outlined the PST's process:

1. Welcome
2. Purpose
3. Review Process
4. Discuss Student Strengths
5. Discuss current levels
6. Discuss strategies tried
7. Brainstorm new strategies
8. Choose ideas to implement
9. Closure/communication plan
10. Adjourn

It was noted that while strengths were specifically articulated, student weaknesses were not discussed as a part of the process; rather, the team talked in terms of current levels of the student, strategies tried, and next action steps.

Interactions and relationships. As members of the team were arriving at the meeting, there was a great deal of interaction noted. Conversations included family updates and celebrations, the traffic encountered during the drive in to work that morning, and sharing of plans for the upcoming Fall Break. Given the rapport observed, it was obvious this was a veteran, long standing team. As the formal meeting began,

members of the team were comfortable sharing ideas, providing suggestions, and asking specific questions in order to problem solve next steps regarding the students brought before them. An example included this exchange among all members regarding a particular student, “Have you tried Check-In/Check-Out (strategy for behavior)? He responds to positive rewards.” “What vowels does he have consistently?” “Put an initial sound he does know with that vowel. Give him some successes and then expand.” “What interventions have been tried in the universal and targeted tiers?” “How about Reading Plus (reading intervention)?” “His teacher does not think that would be a good idea; he reads much differently.” It was noted that the levity of team members at just the right moment allowed for the problem-solving process to be as effective as possible. When the conversation had been going for quite some time and was dealing with serious concerns, one staff member interjected a joke; the whole team laughed and shared in the moment. The team was then able to move on to next steps for the learner.

Process. The two PST observations noted the use of time, opportunities and modeling throughout the process. In terms of time, it was noted that meetings began promptly at the scheduled start time, and the facilitator moved the process along, maximizing the use of time to talk about the learner. Each case brought to the team was afforded the time necessary to problem solve the needs of that particular learner. The discussions were not rushed; data was the focus, as were the needs, not the “issues” of the child.

Opportunities for discussion were the heart of the PST meetings. These were afforded throughout the PST time, allowing for clarification of the level of discussion to

take place during the meeting, putting ideas and strategies out on the table, and getting all voices in the room. This included general collegial conversations, sharing documentation of data, and a full discussion regarding possible appropriate next steps for the learner. The team talked about social emotional needs in tandem with a student's academic progress. Modeling was also evident during the PST meetings observed. For example, special education staff members modeled the RtI problem-solving process by reminding team members that the next step for a particular student was a Child Study Team meeting prior to any formal testing. Special education staff also modeled appropriate intervention strategies to use in the universal setting for a particular student, noting a "sticker chart" as a great way to bring the student into the process by taking ownership of the learning.

RtI components. While observing the PST process, the researcher noted the use of the essential components of the RtI framework. These included: the Three-Tiered Instructional Model, Assessment/Screening, Data Driven Instruction, Progress Monitoring, Family Partnerships and Fidelity of Implementation.

In terms of the three-tiered instructional model, the grade level teacher representative talked about strategies utilized in the universal setting, the targeted interventions tried, and what was/was not working for the particular student. One example shared was the strategy of "check in/check out." Concerns were also shared about having this particular student work with other students, due to previously documented behaviors. Specific questions were asked regarding the three-tiered model: "Has he had targeted/intensive interventions?" The teacher representative talked about very specific targeted interventions tried. She indicated, "In writing, everything is at the

targeted level; he is at the intensive level for reading, working with a specialist.” It was also noted that documentation from the previous school year was reviewed prior to the meeting. The team also talked about students who were not identified for special education services participating in targeted and intensive interventions with a specialist as necessary; the label did not determine the intervention, the needs of the learner drove those decisions.

During both observations of the PST meetings the screening, assessment, and progress monitoring components played a central role in the discussion of the learner. Data was very specific, was used to gain insight into the needs of the learner, and guided next steps. The following excerpt from the observation notes documented the conversation about a particular learner:

“Keep in mind the growth he has made. He has made huge gains, but still has a long way to go. We have talked about this student previously. He is one of our lowest readers; the specialist sees him four times per week using a highly structured multi-sensory based intervention. This approach is working for other students, but not for this particular learner.” The team then talked about the measures used to inform current levels of the student such as AIMSweb and the DRA2. One member wondered if the student had auditory processing issues. It was suggested that the interventionist focus on sounds the student does know: practice, chart progress, and slowly introduce new sounds one at a time. In terms of fluency, “What vowels does the student have consistently? Put those vowels with an initial sound the student does know, ensuring some experiences of success.”

This team clearly knew how to interpret and use data to inform next steps. When talking about AIMSweb (progress monitoring data tool), they specifically cited where the student was in relation to his or her goal for reading. When discussing the DRA 2 scores, they asked detailed questions about the instructional level, fluency, and decoding skills. In terms of progress monitoring, the following example was indicative of the site’s

commitment to the process: “What’s great is that you changed the intervention when you saw it wasn’t working. Now we want to see if the new intervention is going to work before we move forward. It will be implemented every day for 5 weeks before we have the Child Study Team assessment and discussion.” The PST discussions centered on day-to-day assessments, with teachers clearly aware of the specific levels of student progress. Based on daily observations and data collection, the staff member could articulate, “he is really high in math, but not independently.”

Family and community involvement was cited as a core value at the study site. Evidence of this was articulated time and again during the PST observations. The most illustrative example was shared during the second observation. It was noted by the PST facilitator that parents loved this school. When parents requested further testing, they were made aware of the RTI process, with the teacher indicating that a student was provided with classroom and small group interventions prior to being referred to the Child Study Team (CST). The CST then determined whether any additional formal testing was necessary. PST members reported that parents were partners in the process from the start and believed it was because of this partnership that parents felt valued and were involved members of the CST. Members of the PST also reported that families told them over and over again how much they loved the school and what a difference it had made in their lives. Prior to adjournment of the meeting, it was decided to make the staff aware of the high level of parent satisfaction by sharing this as a celebration at the next full staff meeting.

Fidelity of implementation was observed throughout the classroom and PST observations. Careful implementation of the process was demonstrated consistently via the other essential components of the RtI framework. Universal classroom instruction and interventions drove conversations about data, which informed the discussion regarding next steps for the learner. Families were considered partners in the process. The expectation was clear: the RtI framework was foundational to the teaching and learning processes at this site.

Teacher interviews. In order to gain insight into the teacher's familiarity with and use of the RtI framework in general, the interview with each teacher opened with the following two prompts: 1) Tell me about your background knowledge of RtI. When/how did you first become aware of the framework? Over time, how has implementation of the process taken shape in your classroom? and 2) Describe how you know what your students know and are able to do. Teachers' responses varied according to their years of experience as well as their longevity at the study site.

Tell me about your background knowledge of RtI. Teacher A's response revealed her deep understanding of the RtI framework. Her background in Special Education, coupled with her years as an early intervention specialist provided her with opportunities to develop interventions and plans with regard to behavior and academics. At the time of the study, Teacher A was a classroom teacher, having transitioned from Special Education to a regular classroom. She indicated her knowledge of progress monitoring in determining appropriate interventions and instructional strategies for all learners. In

addition, Teacher A was one of a committee of people at the district level involved in planning for district wide implementation of the RtI framework.

Teacher B described her background knowledge this way:

I guess about 5 years ago the new language of Response to Intervention came into play. I took a class with several people from my school. The instructor talked about creating profiles for students and targeted interventions and what that looked like and how that went beyond support for kids in the classroom. It was really looking at the data specifically – as having a baseline for where you begin... what you found, why a kid was not achieving what they needed to ...and then you put in place the intervention. You put in place the activities that went along with that – how to get the child up to meeting that skill. Then you collect the data with observation, through progress monitoring and other methods to try to figure out if you were meeting that child’s needs. It has since evolved and I am on the problem-solving team here, and every week we meet in two grade level teams and we talk about what is being done and we work on helping each other come up with interventions. We talk about what some kids might need, what other teachers have done in the past that might be successful. Then we bring them to our meeting with the three team leaders plus learning specialist, building resource teacher, social worker and administration and we talk about meeting kids’ needs and what is the best way to do that for kids. I have been on that team for the past 12 years – ever since the school opened – so I have a lot of background. My background is also in reading and Special Education. The focus is now on grade level because we are seeing a lot of the same learning issues at each level. Our PST is whole school; the Tuesday meeting is more universal strategies to try before a student would be brought to PST process. If a child has been through the Tuesday process several times, they are then brought to the PST meeting.

Her response provided evidence not only of her depth of knowledge of the process, but also detailed how it was implemented at the study site.

Teacher C first learned about the RtI framework at another school site in the district. She indicated “we were all trying to kind of muddle our way through.” She reported that when she began teaching at the study site, she gained a deeper understanding of the process. Answering a follow up question regarding how the RtI framework has taken shape in her classroom, she indicated, “I think as a good teacher

you are always differentiating for your kids; you are always assessing to see where they are at and then taking them from that point forward – so I’ve always done that. I guess the biggest part that I’ve had to learn to do is tracking the growth through graphs and data.”

Teacher D reported that she came back to the field of education five years prior and became involved in the RtI process as a leader at the study site and since that time, her involvement and interest in RtI had grown. She articulated her involvement with AIMSweb progress monitoring as “a way to work smarter, not harder” and indicated she had “done a lot of work getting materials ready for teachers so they are familiar with the AIMSweb process but also to make it easier for them to use the tool.” She further indicated that she was constantly looking for new interventions for her students.

Finally, according to Teacher E, the RtI framework is a natural way of teaching.

He stated it thusly:

Being kind of a new teacher I don’t know that there was necessarily a time that I learned how to do it any differently. Starting in college and then student teaching here – it was about assessing students, seeing what their abilities are, what they can handle, and then trying to frame lessons and work that can be used for the whole class and then modified just a little bit, individually, for each learner. It’s just kind of a style. From day one, that’s just the way I started teaching. There wasn’t really a mind switch for me where I made a shift. That’s just what I had seen from teachers I student taught with and things that I learned along the way. I don’t know how to define that! For those kids that need that extra intervention, I try to meet with them a couple times a week as opposed to once per week, just to make sure we are checking in. My lowest level group is a high energy group so I meet with them every day at the beginning of every subject just to get them focused and give them an overview of what they are doing for the next hour.

This series of follow up questions were asked: When you were student teaching and in your undergraduate work did you hear anything about Response to Intervention? Did anyone refer to it in those terms? How did they frame that?

Teacher E responded: Nobody ever did frame it to me as “Response to Intervention.” I heard the term “targeted intervention” a lot – for one individual that is lacking in a certain area. I kind of use that term for the groups as well: a targeted intervention. I know the groups... if there is somebody specifically who needs it, I write a targeted intervention. But the terms – I’m not very good with the terms. Like I say, it’s something that is just more natural. It is the way I learned so it’s just more natural way that I go about teaching – or try to anyway.

Although he stated he did not receive formal training regarding the framework, Teacher E’s description was indicative of the deep understanding he had of his students.

How do you know what your students know and are able to do? Teachers at the study site were very focused on multiple forms of data. When asked the question, “How do you know what your students know and are able to do,” each respondent provided insight into the site’s use of data to inform instruction.

Teacher A responded, “Informally, I knew where my students were the first month of school from various activities like cutting and drawing... looking at each student on an informal basis.” She also indicated she used informal math assessments. She reported using more formal measures with the kindergarten DRA tasks for reading. She went on to note that with kids who were struggling, she was formally progress monitoring so she knew who those kids were. Those students were working with her “directly, every single day.” With other students “who are kind of marching along,” she documented progress weekly as she worked with reading groups and small math groups.

Teacher B utilized a lot of data on an ongoing basis. She spoke extensively about her use of the DRA 2 assessment and where her students should be throughout the year. Specifically, she articulated that all students, at the time of the interview, “should be at a level 4 independently or at a level 6 instructional by the end of the trimester in order to be

considered progressing appropriately. All but one of my students are at level 4 or beyond. If they are beyond that level then I need to evaluate where they are at that point as well. They have to be at a level 16 independently by the end of the school year so our goal is to try to get them there as quickly as possible.” Teacher B also mentioned her use of conferencing with students as a means of knowing what they know, understand, and are able to do. She reported that she conferenced with each student weekly, keeping track of the topic of each conference, as well as the individual student’s goals.

Teacher C stated she determined what her students know and are able to do by using different assessments and not just relying on one assessment. When asked to elaborate regarding the types of assessment used, she mentioned the DRA2, quick phonics assessments, sight word lists, phonemic awareness assessments and phonics assessments out of the Florida Center for Reading Research (FCRR). She indicated it was important to utilize the different assessments in order to have more than one example of what her students know about letter identification or phonemic awareness as well as what they know about short and long vowels. When discussing mathematics, Teacher C indicated that she used a variety of different assessments and also pre-assessed as she approached a new unit to see what her students already knew or to determine which skills they weren’t yet ready to approach.

Teacher D related an extensive use of pre-assessments in order to determine what her students knew and were able to do. Specifically, she stated:

For example in math I always pre-test every unit. Every Day Math, (the math series used at the study site) is pretty advanced – but, and this is true every year – I do have a lot of students who really know their stuff and I also have a number of students who don’t – they really just don’t know those skills. Based on where

they are in terms of the pre-test – what skills they have, what skills they don't have – I group them for instruction. The same thing happens in reading. I utilize running records, DRA 2, any kind of reading assessments that I do and I look at those to see what the students need. And at the beginning of the year it may be that we will start with a particular reading level and I group them, but then it becomes apparent that some students really need “summarizing” help and another group of students really need fluency help – and so they are re-grouped based on that. For writing, it is very similar to reading. I have to determine what they really need. Do they need sentences... they really don't know how to write sentences – or these kids really don't know the structure of a paragraph... and then group them working with those things.

This account is illustrative of Teacher D's deep knowledge of her students and their readiness levels. In her combination classroom of second and third graders, grouping is based on what her students need. Consequently, for example, the reading groups are completely diverse. She indicated that every single one of the groups has a second and a third grader in them, and “the students don't even notice the difference anymore.”

Teacher E's response explored the area of relationship-building as a way to determine what his students know and are able to do. He indicated he got “a lot more information talking out some of the questions with students individually or as a group.” He saw those kids who were shy and hard to pull information from and placed them in a smaller group or talked to them one-on-one. He said, “I know those kids who fight for attention and want every word to be heard so I sometimes put them in a group together so they understand that “hey, that person's cutting me off, y'know,” so the students get an understanding of what that is like.” Teacher E felt that testing students is good, but he really worked to get that personal one-on-one to see if his students had an understanding of concepts and to tap into their thoughts. With this type of relationship and understanding of his students as individuals, Teacher E knew his students could

“sometimes think the correct response, but when it came to writing it or performing on the test they totally lapsed – especially at this age – due to being shy or nervous.”

This level of dedication to and caring for students was evident throughout the interviews with all teachers involved in the study.

Principal interview. The interview conducted with the principal considered several aspects of the RtI framework, from initial implementation to the time of the study. The questions posed to gain perspective in this area were based on the classroom and PST observations as well as the teacher interviews. These included delving into the positive regard parents have for the school, the principal’s “look-fors” when observing classrooms, and the initial process for implementation of RtI school-wide. The principal’s background knowledge of RtI was also explored.

Why do parents love this school? When asked this question, the principal did not hesitate. He indicated:

I think what parents really value here is that they *know* that the teachers *will* do what they can to differentiate for kids. And that’s our Child Study Team (CST) – when you go and you see all the legwork that goes into the data collection and the presentation of the student to the parent and to the team and we are doing that protocol where we put up on the screen strengths, concerns, how can we help, that kind of thing ... so parents actually get a good sense, they get the feeling that we know what we are talking about, we’ve got data to back it up and that we are intent on meeting the need of that kid.

He went on to talk about a family who moved to another district but had returned to the school. The staff continued to work to meet the needs of the students, utilizing information gathered prior to the family’s move. The principal was emphatic in stating, “I am so glad they are back because we can get our hands into what we were doing for the student. I mean that’s one thing we worry about – we put so much work into these

kids and then you know... it's kind of a transient community. But with that specific parent we met about one of the students and we were asking the right questions and we got the right answers from this parent and we could see that this kid really *is* making progress." The principal wanted to clearly indicate the level of care and concern he and his staff had for students and families. He reported that other parents felt this, indicating their overwhelming support for the school.

What are your look-fors when observing classrooms? Again, the principal responded with animation, stating:

I look for engagement, I look for rigorous activities, I look for teachers that are engaged with their kids... not sitting behind a desk. I want teachers out there, I want teachers interacting with kids, you know. I really hone in on differentiation within the literacy block. I mean, when I interview teachers or even long term subs, it's like "what's your literacy block going to look like?" That's always one of my first questions. Early intervention is also one of the foundations of my philosophy; getting those kids in early and getting those interventions put in place for those kids that are struggling... I look for what's up on the walls... the wall is your second teacher. What is it that they're displaying? Are they displaying kids work that's great – and if they've got a couple of posters... but if I see chart paper with "boo-boo" tape and corrections and things like that and mistakes and edits and all that kind of thing – that's the stuff I look for and that's the stuff I love to see in the classroom.

When initially implementing RtI, how did you sell the staff as to its merits? The principal indicated that RtI was actually one reason he wanted to lead at this site; "it was already pretty much in place." He stated he really didn't need to sell its merits. He talked about it in terms of an evolution over time:

This building opened in 1997 and they already had this structure set into place and I saw that and wanted to take it to the next level. And so when I came we really started talking about, "What is it that you are really doing? You already have some interventions in place." But we wove in the progress monitoring. We mixed up the teams this year and structured them by grade level. It really kind of shook people up but it also... I wanted those Tuesday morning grade level

meetings to be more than a venting session. I saw a lot of spinning of wheels... and it's like "no," this is a problem-solving team here. We do the first line of defense with what can we do as a *team* now on Tuesday to help this teacher out and start talking about "okay, we've got some data here, you might want to try this." And then we take it to the next level of "that is not working, what do we try next?"

He passionately illustrated the "never give up" nature of his staff and their willingness to continue to look for interventions and solutions to meet the needs of the learner. He noted that the grade level teams included specialists from the special education team, as well as classroom teachers, indicating, "RtI is everybody. If you're having an issue with a special education kid – whatever information you might be talking about, whatever issue... that other teacher is thinking well that makes sense – I could use that strategy in my own instruction, whether the kid's sped (special education) or not."

When did you first become aware of the RtI framework? The principal recalled that he first became aware of RtI when he was an Assistant Principal at another site in the district. He indicated, "I went to an RtI conference in a neighboring district and took my learning specialists and went, 'wow!' We had something kind of like that – we had a Student Support Team – but I remember going to the principal and saying I wanted to do more of it." I followed up asking, "What was the 'wow'?" He replied, "What was the 'wow'? It was all the footwork that we did before getting to the Student Support Team; before it was an emergency. I really wanted to re-look at our meeting structure and really wanted to get grade levels to meet and talk about kids. All the time. Talk about kids. That's what I wanted to have happen. That was the 'wow' part... It was that."

Problem-solving team interview. The interview with the PST revealed the deeply embedded process the site has in collaboratively determining what is best for all learners.

In terms of the RtI process in general, the interview started with a question stemming from the prior observations of the PST, specifically delving into the positive regard parents have for the school. The second observed PST meeting opened with remarks from the facilitator regarding the positive feedback she had received from a number of parents. General conversation among the team members continued, with comments about the positive relationships they had with families, as well as instances of parents indicating their support of the teachers and the school. That conversation prompted the first question in the interview session:

Why do parents love this school? This single question elicited responses of an emotional nature that were difficult to adequately capture on paper. Respondents were strikingly honest and open in sharing their thoughts and depth of caring.

The first respondent noted:

There is just a very strong, collaborative, team approach with the special ed. team and the regular ed. team as well as parents... problem solving through that. So I think that's probably one of the reasons that this school is a great school. It's very friendly, the office staff is friendly... the principal is a great leader and we have the building resource teacher who is here leading us too, and support staff... and it feels good to me. I think maybe that feels good to parents, as well.

Another respondent noted how welcoming the school was from the first minute, stating, "Like, just coming in, how welcoming the office staff is and very happy to help you, which in other schools is not necessarily the case. Teachers are very open to having parents come into the classroom, volunteer, they want the parents' help; they want the support." She went on to say, "Parents feel like they are a part of the team. They're not just a separate entity outside of the school."

Another team member responded to the question this way:

I think I would attribute that to the individual attention that our teachers give students. We don't look at "here's this big group in the middle, here's a group here, here's a group here (gestures both ends of the spectrum)." We look at the individual child. So we look at the student and their strengths, their needs – whatever that is: social/emotional, if they are high, they're low, behavior, whatever it is, and we look at that specifically. So when we talk to parents, we know a lot of information about their kids. So I think that really helps them – sitting down talking to them, they're like "wow – y'know – you know what you're doing, you've got a lot of information and you have your plan." So, I think that helps with parents, too.

Another team member put it this way, "That ability to not give up and say well this problem can't be solved. We just keep re-going over the kids. There are some kids we've been talking about since Kindergarten and we haven't yet solved the problem (laughter from team members) - yet we keep bringing them up, we keep trying new things. There's always a solution. I think that's part of it."

These responses are illustrative of the intense commitment this staff has to its students and their parents.

Focus group. Finally, the focus group's insights into the general use of the RtI framework, prompted by the statement, "Talk about how the RtI framework has changed conversations about students at this school," served to solidify the impressions gleaned from the classroom and PST observations, and interviews with the teachers, principal and PST.

Talk about how the RtI framework has changed conversations about students at this school. The first respondent indicated, "What came to mind for me is what I have learned by being involved in the process. You don't identify a child in any way until adequate *instruction* had been given. So sometimes we see a kid that is struggling and

we think he's got some sort of disability. But if we go back and give him adequate intervention and instruction he progresses. So that idea of appropriate progress and that gap analysis; I learned a lot about that and how kids learn with adequate instruction versus disability.”

Another team member put it in these terms:

At this school it wasn't “I *think* this, I *think* that” it was, “I know this because I have this data.” Y'know they do have those gut feelings, but it is backed up by what they've gotten on those students and said “this is what I've tried, I have it documented, this is what's working, this is what hasn't worked... I am worried about this student and I have this to back it up.” And I think talking about a student it's not at all just, “well... I'm a little worried, I think this student isn't reading on grade level, I'm not sure.” We talk and say, “I gave him this assessment and he's been consistently here. I've done this, I've done that.” So it's very data-driven to back up those worried feelings we have about students.

Another focus group member indicated that what the conversations are changing to is exactly what these teachers are saying: what's the data? Are they making appropriate progress? What's the gap analysis?

Another respondent keyed in on the use of the RtI framework for all learners at the study site when she said, “As the process has changed over time, the team has evolved to better meet the needs of the kids that we're seeing in the classroom. And so for me it's moved from ‘this is all just special ed. identification’ to now ‘this is looking at all types of kids; kids that maybe have some behavioral concerns, maybe some need to be advanced’ – you know, just different kinds of learners; it's not just specifically based on sped anymore.”

This response led to a follow up question, asking, “Why was this school able to make the transition from RtI being ‘all about special education’ to all about meeting the needs of all learners?” One focus group member responded with these thoughts:

I think one thing that helps is our building is very collaborative and problem solving is a big thing that we like to spend time on! We like to try to figure out kids and what we can do better (laughing)... and pretty much everybody in the building is that way and administration obviously supports that so, I mean, every Tuesday we’re in grade level meetings – and I’m in a group, too – all of the specialists are in one and we’re just problem solving kids, just talking about – like you (indicating classroom teacher participant) had that high student who was having all of the behavior issues, y’know – and so we tried to figure out some motivational stuff and different things you could do with him and so, I think that collaboration, that people want to do that, makes a difference.

Her colleague followed up by saying, “I think the meetings that we do, these take some of the emotion out of the decisions, as well. You work with a kid, they’re struggling, it’s human nature – you’re going to get frustrated with that kid. You just... you want to throw your hands up, ‘I’ve tried everything there is.’ But when you get to go to the group, you get to ask questions and so many fresh ideas come out because they don’t have that emotional attachment to that kid – whether it be positive or negative – so you get some more clear thought and ideas.”

Finally, it was noted that part of the evolution was the constitution of the team. The team members changed over time from only special education staff to one that was more inclusive. At the time of the study, the team included representation from primary, middle, and intermediate grade levels as well as gifted education and ESL. The responses from the focus group illustrated the changes not only in the constitution of the team, but also in the conversations at the site, showing commitment to the framework by

the use of collaboration, data, and problem solving as key components in meeting the needs of all learners.

What did the observations and interviews say about the use of the framework as a strength-based model? The classroom observations were illustrative of how teachers use the RtI framework from a strength-based perspective. Structures were in place to meet a continuum of learners in the classroom, with teachers knowing and using students' strengths to enhance the learning. Specifically, a vignette from the observation in Classroom E illustrated this teacher's use of instructional time in the universal setting to allow for students' strengths and interest to drive the discussion regarding the text they were engaging in that day. Teacher E's use of questioning to elicit engagement with his two "lowest" reading groups was documented as follows:

Group 1: What do you think we are going to find out in this article? You already have some prior knowledge from watching the news...I chose this one because I know you'd love this one... We are going to focus on the middle article for today.

Do you want to read it alone or together? (Together.) When you have an idea pop up, stop us. Which way do we want to go? (Decided together who would start reading...)

Teacher started reading... read a bit... then asked: What does that mean?

Observer Note: The norm is discussion – connections to self. "Kick the habit" what does that mean? Where have you heard that before? Teacher read a bit more... then asked any thoughts on that? Student response: They are trying to have a better place for our world... Teacher clarified "population" means number of people. Remember when we talked about the difference between million, billion, etc.

By the time you are 20 years old there are going to be however many billion cars on the road? Think about the amount of gas needed – how much will it cost? Student asks a question. Teacher: That's a great question! So they are making these chargers – what happens if you go on a trip longer than 100 miles? I bet, since they are coming out in 2011, they'll probably have longer, bigger, so it can run more. But what if you are driving to Mexico? You can't charge up the car

for 8 hours. What are some ways the engineers can ...? So you still need some gas cars for long trips? So (student name) is saying, if this is your battery (drew it out) once it is full, it's full. The solution would be to make a bigger battery? Even if bigger... etc. Are you making a connection there? Just like the recyclable bags – we have to rinse them out, so that uses water... that is a great connection! It would be good for going to the store, and daily stuff (work). Now – not very usable for big things. You couldn't even drive to Grand Junction/Copper/Vail. You would make it there, but need to stay to charge it for 8 hours before you come back! That's just wasting your money! Who wants these?! I bet you've seen similar cars – so we are making steps to get better... this is pretty high tech. Back in 19 something, something they didn't have enough gas – they had to ration ... so we had to get smarter and smarter.

How 'bout when you finish the article, write your ideas in your journal... and maybe we'll share them. Those are some great ideas! Write them down!

Group 2: (students had read the article independently – so had more time for connections and discussions.) The discussion started with: Let's build off that idea. How might...? This might be beyond your knowledge, but... (this immediately perked them up). What issues does this bring up?

You know what a triple A battery looks like; is C or D battery bigger or smaller? Bigger – so more powerful, right? Teacher E then talked about the explosions of power in gas engine cars. Observer Note: Students not in this group were reading the article independently and were engaged by it as well, sometimes listening in on the discussion.)

What if they forget to plug in the car – how is that like what we might do? Have you heard of people running out of gas?

This is one example, chosen to provide insight into the use of the RtI framework from a strength-based view point.

The two Problem-Solving Team (PST) observations clearly showed how this site utilized students' strengths as a cornerstone of the RtI framework. For example, the conference room poster for conducting a problem-solving team meeting outlined the process: 1) Welcome; 2) Purpose; 3) Review Process; 4) Discuss Student's Strengths; 5) Discuss Current Levels; 6) Discuss Strategies Tried; 7) Brainstorm New Strategies;

8) Choose Ideas to Implement; 9) Closure and Communication Plan; and 10) Adjourn. A student's deficit or weakness was not considered a part of the process; rather, members of the problem-solving team discussed the student in terms of strengths and current levels, focusing on data to inform next action. In addition, observation notes from the first PST visit indicated: this process is about the data and how the team can try more things to get at the issue. It was collegial, collaborative, and incorporated a variety of specific data points. PST members made an effort to point out some positives, even for those most impacted students. The second PST observation noted an exchange about a student for whom behavior is a concern (numbers are included to distinguish the speakers):

1: She hurts other kids because she hurts inside. 2: Are there resources for school and for home – structures for home (teacher requested of the learning specialist)? This request came from conferences... the grandma needs these. 3: We brainstormed strategies on Tuesday – she is reading to kindergarten students at the end of the day, this is working great. 2: Has a connection with a particular teacher and goes to see her first thing in the morning, too – for a hug.

Rather than focusing on the concerning behavior, it was noted that the team found ways to use the student's strengths to engage her in more appropriate behaviors, while also discussing strategies to share for use at home.

The interviews with teachers provided limited evidence that the study site used the RtI framework from a strength-based viewpoint, as the sessions did not include a specific question about the framework as a strength-based initiative. The researcher noted that two of the teachers' responses to other questions did connect the framework to tapping into the strengths of the learner. For example, when talking about her knowledge of the RtI framework, Teacher C indicated, "...you are always assessing to see where they are at and then taking them from that point on forward." When talking about the use

of data to inform instruction, Teacher B noted a continuum of learners and how best to determine next steps regardless of where a student is on that continuum. She said, “Well, as a teacher you are responsible for all of the data. When you do the assessment at the end of the trimester that’s when you know who is below and who is well above (grade level expectations). Out of all of that data comes the question: “Now what do I do with these kids? How do I meet the needs of these really high ones; how do I meet the needs of these really low ones?” For first grade you need other data. Most of it comes out of the assessments we’re required to give... But it also comes out of the kids – and what they need.”

The interview session with Teacher E was used as an opportunity to follow up on the observation of the classroom where the types of questioning used for the teacher’s lowest group were noted. The questioning used did not signify that the students were in the lowest group by expecting low level responses. It was noted the teacher used respectful questions; respectful of the students and where they were and also pushing them to think beyond rote answers. In talking this through during the interview, Teacher E indicated, “Exactly – they have great ideas – but their understanding of the text and then giving them a vocabulary word making a connection – that’s where you lose them. I try to have more discussions so they hear me say those connections... and we go from there.”

The interview conducted with the principal did not include any specific questions about the framework from a strength point of view; however, the principal keyed in on the strength-based approach to the RtI framework when he talked about the process of the

PST meetings. The strengths of the learner are charted before any other discussions take place. Further, he indicated, “When hiring, that’s what I look for in teachers – is that kind of y’know – why do you want to teach? I love kids, I want to be with kids, I want to teach kids, I love to see the light bulb go on. When those are the answers I get from a teacher, that’s somebody I want in the building.” He emphasized the evolution of the team from conversations about only those learners who struggle to encompassing all learners and looking at their individual needs. “It (the RtI process) has really become that whole team approach to talking about what kids need. And it’s not based on any type of a label or any type of identification.”

The PST interview’s focus on strengths was clear in a number of the responses to questions throughout the session. Regardless of the stated question, responses harkened back to the needs of the individual student. One respondent said, “...this school just exudes collaborative team teaching and just a general sense of love for the kids....” Another response indicated, “We look at the individual child. So we look at the student and their strengths, their needs – whatever that is: social/emotional, if they are high, they’re low, behavior, whatever it is, and we look at that specifically.” The following response was also indicative of the focus on strengths: “I think the thing that we do really well here, is we get a lot of information from other schools and we take that information with a grain of salt and do our own assessments of kids and get to know those kids for who they are here. And not really look at the negative data that comes in with those kids. We get to know them for who they are here.” Two additional responses also captured the focus on strengths: “A lot of our teachers – they’re not just focused on the academic part

but they are looking at the social/emotional side, they're looking at those home lives, they're looking at trying to foster the child – figure out what they're really good at and develop them and let them flourish in whatever they're successful in. And so, I think because of that, the kids feel like they're really a part of it. And they feel loved;" and "I think that everyone really, you know, gets excited about the little successes, too."

Finally, the focus group touched on the use of the RtI framework as a strength-based model when talking about the work the school was continuing to do to improve the process and make it more effective. One respondent noted, "I've always said that to myself here, that it feels like we are spinning our wheels. But I guess it's not really spinning wheels – we spend a lot of time problem solving and I think it is well worth that time. I think I need to look at it differently than spinning wheels. But, I mean, also there are sometimes that we just gotta get going and work on those kids." Another member of the focus group went on with that train of thought, saying:

It might be a re-direction so we really don't want to sit there and say "this kid has this issue and this issue and this issue and I've tried this and it doesn't work, I've tried this and it doesn't work...." There's only so much of that you need to have during that problem-solving process and then we really need to push through that to what are next steps... what are we going to try now. Yes, that didn't work, instead of harping on it let's say okay – so it didn't work, we need to change our intervention, we need to change what we are doing with this kid. So I think part of that is spinning them a little bit and then we try and really move to "okay, so our purpose is to help this kid. How do we move on, what are our next steps?"

Talking about a teacher at the site, one of the focus group members noted, "He's got high expectations for all students – not 'this is the low group' – he's got high expectations for them... and they see how he acts and his work ethic so that transfers over to how hard they're going to work." These responses were given as evidence of the site's

commitment to all learners. The focus group members indicated that the staff approaches each student from a positive view point, believing “we can make a difference for all kids.”

Does the model change when considering advanced learners, and if so, how?

In looking at the RtI framework’s use in identifying and meeting the needs of advanced learners, it was difficult to ascertain data specifically addressing this question from the five classroom observations. However, these observations clearly showed how teachers’ instructional practices are informed by the RtI framework in meeting the needs of all learners, including those who may show advanced potential and those who are already identified as gifted. Leveled reading and math groups were facilitated routinely in each classroom, providing advanced learners the opportunity to move at an appropriate pace and experience the depth and complexity necessary to grow as learners. Teachers used open-ended prompts and questioning techniques to challenge advanced learners, as well.

Examples included:

Teacher A: What do you think he’s doing? Do you think it is grumpy? How do you think that would make him feel? How do you think he’s feeling? What do you notice? How can you tell? When I say “add more detail,” what does that mean?

Teacher B: Write as if you were the apple. What part of when the apple was growing (the apple’s growing process) do I want to start at? What should my name be? I am wondering what he’s going to do... How would you end that sentence? What would happen next?

Teacher C: What does that sound like to you? What do you like to paint? Why? What do you think that means? Do you think Toby (character in the story) is going to be in trouble? Why? What’s he doing now? Can you tell by the eyes how he is feeling? What would happen if...? What do you notice? Where do you think they might be going?

Teacher D: What do you think this one means? What does this make you think of? What connections are you making? What does that remind you of? What other words sound like that? Why do you think...? Why didn't the class do...?

Teacher E: Write those ideas down. This reminds me of... What issues does this bring up? What do you think we are going to find out? Why did you choose that story to read? Where have you heard that before? Do you have any thoughts on that? What happens if...? But what if...? Are you making a connection there?

Specific examples of the site's use of the framework with advanced learners were not observed in the first of two Problem-Solving Team (PST) observations. During the second observation, one of the students brought up for discussion was an advanced learner. The process did not change when talking about the advanced learner. The team examined data; teachers provided insights as to current state, and the team talked about next steps. The observation notes indicated:

The student's cognitive testing results were shared. Teacher stated, "I don't know how accurate that is. He's very intelligent, but..." The intervention specialist added, "We started him with Junior Great books, and he was very into it. He is usually not into what the rest of the class is doing during the reading block. He was engaged with the vocabulary and the questions. He also participates in the math enrichment group twice per week." The team talked further and agreed the main thing is to pull him in and get the interest. Another member of the team shared information about some things going on at home. Next steps: Try the check in/check out strategy so he has a planned connection with an adult on a daily basis; talk about him again at the PST meeting in three to four weeks.

During the interviews with teachers, to provide insights into the use of the framework for high potential and gifted learners, three questions were posed. The questions were intended to elicit input regarding the teachers' perception of and work with advanced learners. First, the participants were asked, "What do you identify as the most important aspect in identifying a student for gifted programming?" That question was followed up by asking, "What do you identify as the greatest challenges in meeting

the needs of the advanced learners in your classroom?” The teachers were also asked to “talk about how you differentiate instruction for the advanced learners in your classroom.”

What do you identify as the most important aspect in identifying a student for gifted programming? Teacher A responded thusly, using a former student to illustrate her thoughts:

I think at times they might present as behavior problems, might present as clued out a little bit because they are a little bit bored. I think with one of my kids last year, I used to think she was more of a behavior problem, kind of “street savvy,” but I think looking back and looking at the scores she may have been bored and that was the behavior that she showed me. At times she was reading really high, but other times she couldn’t write as well as she read. I think it’s hard to find a true gifted kid at times because they present so many different things. So as a kindergarten teacher it’s kind of hard at times. Is the behavior masking the academic level – where they need to go?

Teacher B also responded using former students as an example. The interview exchange was transcribed as follows:

Teacher B: When I think of gifted learners they are kind of the “out of the box learners.” They go beyond just being advanced, they think differently; they approach problems very differently. I had two kids last year that were really kids that stood out as different thinkers.

I followed up, asking her to give me an example of how she knew that. “What kinds of things would they do or say?”

Teacher B: When I was talking about Science, our unit was “pushes and pulls” and kinds of motion. We talked about wheels and when going down an incline they’ll go faster than if they are on a plane. One boy approached me and asked when we were going to learn about liquids – he was very interested in science – he wanted to know when we were going to be doing different things with Chemistry. I told him we really aren’t going to be doing a lot of that this year. Our units were magnets and living things but we were going to have a Science Fair. I had a first grade Science Fair where they could come up with things they wanted to learn about that we weren’t going to learn about in the classroom and it was phenomenal. We went through the scientific method with living things and

coming up with a hypothesis and determining if it was true and did that as a class. Using that same model, they took that home to come up with a project. They had about 6 weeks to do it so it provided enough time that if they wanted to plant something and watch it grow they had enough time to do that. Or if they wanted to do it over two days, they could do it that way, too. Out of that question, that's kind of how you determine. Kids that went beyond what I was teaching; so far beyond that it wasn't within a first grade range.

Teacher C first talked about her collaboration with the intervention specialist, saying, "I give her the information that I know and have her come and look at the kiddo, and we talk about strategies in the classroom." She went on to say,

Let's say we were having a book talk. I always try to ask higher level thinking questions to elicit responses from the higher level thinking kiddoes. If something in particular was said I would write that down and keep track of that and connect with the specialist about it. I had a student last year who was very focused on baseball; everything had to do with baseball; reading, writing, everything... he was a high reader. When he wrote about baseball he was writing much more... with much more sophistication because it was his passion area. He would turn every assignment into a baseball story somehow. If the assignment was about an apple or to describe a jack-o-lantern or a scarecrow – and he turned it into "this jack-o-lantern would have played for a baseball team!"

Teacher D responded with specific examples from her classroom:

I think it's a lot of what you are doing in the classroom and how they are performing in the classroom. Are they a student who gets work done quickly, that understands even with that "quick" (snapped fingers) that they've gotten everything? A lot of times for my kids, if I think they know it, I don't teach them the lesson necessarily. They can do 3-4 problems and if they can show me that they've got it – then y'know what? They can show me they know it then they need to move on. So that to me is a big sign. Kids are complete out-of-the-box thinkers – it just is amazing – and I've had several that the things that they come up with like just blow me away, like "how did you get that from what we're talking about?" They just – they go the extra mile. Their thinking is just, it's very adult-like in a lot of ways. But even sometimes beyond what I would think kids would get from it, they get something more than that. I've had kids come up and share just odd facts... like did you know that this person got stung by a 1,000 bees and they still lived. You know it's not stuff that tons of kids are real interested in – it's more adult-type things that are really interesting for them. I also notice their vocabulary is more advanced, so the way that they explain things – they can actually give you an explanation for how they got a problem or why they said

this; whereas sometimes other kids know it is the right answer but they can't really explain it to you.

Teacher E indicated he was not sure he completely understood the question, but went on to respond:

I know what I look for... they are more those that can really perform at a high pace, ones that have support at home to back that up, if they are not getting something they can go home and ask questions, as well. They are more independent, but they are held to a lot higher standard. They have a rubric they have to follow and rate themselves on and it is designed around our grades and standards. But they are not allowed to get anything less than a "3" they know what it takes to get a 3 and they know they have the ability so they know what to do to get a 3 and try to shoot for a 4 to show me they are up to the challenge. I look for the higher level thinking questions from them... not simply yes/no – or being able to open the book and find the answer, it has to be a whole discussion. As far as identifying them it's that gut feeling at first, you know, you assess, you take all the high kids that scored really great on the test and then you start meeting with them and working with them. It may take a novel, at first, to get to your strong readers and thinkers. It is their questioning and being able to talk about the book and their examples.

What do you identify as the greatest challenges in meeting the needs of the advanced learners in your classroom? Teacher A indicated that about 8 of the students in her class at the time of the study were advanced. She went on to describe the challenges she faced in meeting their needs:

Every day we do some challenge activities and I have to kick it up a notch so they write their own sentence or just kind of keep them going ahead. And with math I've got the same 8 kids who are getting the norm and ready to go beyond. I have to stretch *my* thinking in what can they do above and beyond. They are usually the first ones done and it's on target and it is easy for them. And I have been doing that hopefully almost daily or weekly. Coming up with those challenge activities. With the poetry notebook, that was really easy for them. I had to come up with more difficult material for them. So, they were required to choose among finding their own poem, writing their own poem, or taking "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" and making their own rhyme with that. Changing it up and tweaking activities to keep it at their level at that higher end is the biggest challenge.

Teacher B stated:

It's not always that they need more – but they need to kind of go beyond what you're teaching. I think it's determining the difference between “more” and “challenging.” More I can do very easily – I can say here's a “take it to your seat” activity, take a folder – go ahead and do it. It's more work, but challenging them is getting them to explore even beyond that. I think technology is one way we can use to give them more challenging materials. And I found with those two particular kids last year (referred to in her prior answer), even as I was giving them more that they still needed a lot more beyond what I could give them. I mean they were learning math at a second grade level; just a lot further beyond what I can do in 1st grade.

Teacher C's response was different from the other teachers interviewed. When asked what the greatest challenge in meeting the needs of the advanced learners in her classroom were, she noted,

For 1st grade it is really not that difficult. They are usually most advanced in reading. All of our reading is differentiated and writing is, too...so maybe they are working on complex sentences instead of simple sentences and those kinds of things. And with the math, as far as Every Day Math is concerned in 1st grade, I've never had anybody that has passed that end of the year right off the bat so I haven't had to really go and extend. If there are students who know some of the concepts, I just differentiate for them. I don't make them do the whole group lesson, I'll give them something probably a little more independent to do or a little higher level thinking.

Teacher D's response was immediate: Resources!

I am constantly asking the intervention specialist what I can do for these kids. I personally feel it's really sad that in RtI – and I know that this is true of a lot of schools – that the big focus is on the struggling learner – and in the RtI process, kids like this don't get brought up. It's just up to the teacher to just kind of set them on their path or figure it out but... I try and seek out resources from the specialist, or on the internet or whatever I can find because I do need to differentiate for them – so when I do pretests for math or when I have kids that are reading at a 4th or 5th grade level... I have had kids reading at an 8th grade level in my class... so I searched for appropriate kid-friendly novels that were at that level. They needed to be reading that level but some of the content was just too advanced for 3rd graders so I would go and ask 5th grade teachers what would be appropriate for my 3rd graders content-wise.

Teacher E's response was also immediate: Time. He elaborated, stating:

There are so many other things that pull you away... you tend to think those kids are high they can do some things on their own; I don't need to give them the attention. And you feel bad about it every day, that you don't get to spend the time and at least ask one question to them. That's the hardest part – not being able to give them the equal amount of time. And there's that whole debate on equal and equitable but just as a human being – you have that mind frame that you want to give those kids more time. Just think how much farther you could take them. That's where parent volunteers really help – like the woman who was in when you observed – who used to be a HS English teacher. Really helping out and the kids love her. If I didn't have that it would just be more pressure. She really takes a lot of the pressure off, so that helps.

Talk about how you differentiate instruction for the advanced learners in your classroom. Teacher A indicated, “You always plan for hitting high and low.” She went on to explain further:

What I've been telling my students is: If you think this is too difficult, I'm going to be on the carpet...so they can come to me for help. I just need to make time and think about the main skill how I can push it up a notch. That group (the high group) really gets the concept of “ing” and are writing all kinds of “ing” words. The other kids just know it as “ing” – they don't really get the concept yet. I have to plan for those challenge activities. And I'll use that word with the students: challenge. I'll say to them, “Okay we are going to do a challenge activity. Who can get ten apples on top?” Some kids can barely do this. My advanced learners had it done in two seconds! So to them I said, “What do you think... how many apples do you think are on their heads now?” and they looked at me like, “I don't know...” so I said, “How are you going to figure that out? Go back and try to figure it out – if there are 10 on each head how many do we have all together?” We are really big into problem solving in my classroom. How are we going to solve our problems? We start that from day one. I have a very diverse group of kids this year.

Teacher B gave specific examples, stating:

In reading our school uses the Junior Great Books program that includes a lot of the higher level thinking skills – looking for the vocabulary, analyzing the vocabulary, discussions that go a lot deeper than what I would be doing with some of my other groups. In math a lot of times the high students work on activities or extensions that would go beyond what we are learning. We have math tubs and they can do an activity that reinforces the concept – like a game or

something connected to what we were learning. They can take those concepts on the computer and do different activities. In addition they will be working on double digit addition or subtraction while the other kids are working on getting their facts up through twenty.

The interview session with Teacher C included this exchange after the question was initially posed to her:

Teacher C: For reading, I meet with the advanced group every other day – on their off days they are doing Accelerated Reader. For example, on the day you were observing, with my lowest group, we were using magnetic letters just to build simple consonant – vowel – consonant words. With my higher group there would definitely be more complex “chunks” like “ough” that they would be working on and build with that – instead of just “at.” I also have my highest level do a reading response journal and it’s not just who, what, where, when, and why; it’s more high level sentences they have to finish.

Follow up: Are the groupings static or flexible?

Teacher C: Oh, no. They are flexible – in fact I started assessing last week and they are all going to be pretty much different by the time we’re all said and done but that’s what’s great about it. I’ve got two students that made a ton of quick progress so they will definitely be moving into a different group.

Follow up: Would they be moved because they are ready to give more (yes)... what would be some examples of the different levels of responses?

Teacher C: On grade level would be a re-tell: who, what, where, when, how, and why... but I always try to throw in there with the on grade and even lower kids: What do you think the author’s purpose was; why do you think the author wrote this story? Just to get them doing some higher level thinking, too.

Follow up: For a student who is advanced, what kind of response would you be expecting?

Teacher C: I would expect them to write down the re-tell/summary. They have to also be able to answer what was the purpose and what was the author trying to tell you?

In response to this question, Teacher D indicated:

Really it’s just focusing on what they need. So if they are reading at DRA level 70, then that’s what I’m looking for; trying to focus on higher level thinking skills, inferencing, synthesizing the information – really you know that Bloom’s

Taxonomy for my higher readers. For math I've had kids in the past where I have compacted the curriculum for them; they were kids who didn't, at the beginning of the year, meet that flexing criteria but who were really catching on to concepts quickly. Again, could do 4 or 5 problems and know it perfectly. I worked with the intervention specialist to see how I could get them to do the first half of 4th grade so they can start going to 4th grade for the last half of the school year and we worked it out. It's a lot of planning and it's a lot of looking for resources... you can't do it by yourself!

Teacher E's response indicated that his differentiation for high or advanced learners goes into more depth and complexity than that of the typical learner. He put it in these terms:

The higher level groups don't just fill out a worksheet – I have them take certain notes and then I put little almost like footnotes of things to be looking for all the time. It's a list of all the kinds of reading strategies there are: compare/contrast, predicting, wondering, and sequencing of events – just so they have those kinds of things they fall back on and see. And then they take notes, they annotate what kind of thinking they are doing at the time and what page or line number that really brought that thought on so that when I am able to spend time with them we waste no time; we can just go straight to that point and it leads to discussion and that lets me know how they are progressing. I don't have to say here's a worksheet on cause and effect, or read a paragraph and answer these 5 questions on cause and effect; they are actually just finding that on their own and realizing that. To me that is more valuable for them.

During the interview with the principal and the PST, participants were asked to describe how this process differs for high ability learners versus struggling learners. They were also asked to respond to two questions related to advanced learners: "What do you identify as the greatest challenge in using this process to identify the needs of advanced learners," and "What do you identify as the greatest promise in using PST data to serve the needs of advanced learners?"

Describe how this process differs for high ability learners versus struggling learners. The principal indicated it really shouldn't differ. He went on to say, "It needs

to be the same – because the needs aren't being met. The intervention might be different, they might go on an ALP (Advanced Learning Plan) if they are identified, but I think it's the same... the process is the same. You've got a kid, what's going on... they're bored or they're blowing through stuff, the teacher needs more materials... you've got parents questioning what's going on. You bring it to the team, y'know, you talk about whatever we need to do. It sounds like we need to get the intervention specialist involved or whatever and so it – to me it's the same as for a struggling learner... it doesn't matter. You want kids to succeed at their level whether they need to be at grade level or above. And some of the behavior concerns are going to be because of the curriculum and not being engaged, not being rigorous enough or challenging enough or creative enough for that kid.”

Two of the Problem-Solving Team members responded:

Respondent #1 stated: I think that the process is a little bit more accelerated for high ability learners, just because when we are looking at a student who is gifted or high, we're looking for them to have enrichment, be accelerated, possibly flexed up. So, we do the process, I think, maybe a little bit faster. For example we have a student who is new in 4th grade and we're seeing just amazing things from this kid and so we are bringing him up through the process starting the next meeting but we've already got him flexing up because we've already gathered that data. So we're going to bring him through and make sure we stay on that. I, personally, think it is more accelerated for them.

Respondent #2 added: One thing as a staff that I think we do very well here is put the student's needs first and you have to look at each individual student and what they need, no matter what the level of the student is. That's very important because I think kids have to feel well cared for; they have to feel like somebody is really thinking about them and that's what you have here at this school.

What do you identify as the greatest challenge in using this process to identify the needs of advanced learners? The principal identified the following challenges when considering the use of the framework in identifying the needs of advanced learners:

You have to have that whole body of evidence and then, you know, parents relying so heavily on the testing, or teachers looking at the testing too – but you need to have all of it together in order to identify a kid that might be on an ALP. I don't know if I really see a huge challenge with that because it's been working so well here. And it's also – I think the other challenge is getting teachers on board with it. That it's not just behavior or it's not just this kid being bad, there's something else going on here and them buying into it... and then them listening to the specialist and implementing those interventions and seeing the results... I think that's probably a challenge, as well. So one of those challenges might be teachers being able to open their minds to say this framework can be used for advanced learners, too.

This question elicited a lengthy exchange among the PST members:

Respondent #1: I am thinking that it's easier probably to identify what kids *don't* know: They don't know this, this, and this... based on what they need to know. But when we talk about a student like we talked about previously, how much do they truly know? I mean, how can you get the cap on that and how can we figure out what they do know versus what they don't know? I think it's harder.

Respondent #2: I was going to say having the materials, the resources available to be able to say, yes, this is where they truly are at, would be very helpful. To be able to work with those students. I feel like at the elementary level we are very limited with what we have available to us in terms of assessments.

Respondent #3: In the primary grades the thing I'm finding the most challenging is developing materials and curriculum that is not just "more" for the kids but is actually challenging to the kids without having them do a lot more work. As a first grade teacher, you know, they do have a limit... as to what they can do. And I had a few kids last year that I was always looking to provide more challenging materials and give them stuff that really got at where their needs were. I kind of run out of resources – um, I can always turn to other teachers, but I just felt that that is the biggest struggle. The difference between "more" and "challenging" material.

Respondent #1: Another thing I'd like to add is that usually a student isn't brought to the PST process unless there's an "issue." Some of the gifted kids will fall through the cracks because they're not misbehaving or they're passing all the

tests! So, in that sense they may not get to the process as quickly because they are not causing any issues. The other thing, in the assessment of the gifted kids, I think is hard is that a lot of them shut down. We have a 5th grade student that we think might be gifted but he doesn't do anything. He doesn't take any tests, so we really have no way of knowing really what he knows.

Respondent #2: Another thing that I find challenging with gifted students is that sometimes their level of knowledge does not necessarily match things like their writing skills and so it is very hard to access what they truly know because they can't get it out. And so that's a challenge to me. As far as your question like through this process – I know that a lot of times those kids don't necessarily come up in the conversations at the PST meetings because we talk about them at our grade level meetings and get ideas to try and then go back in the classroom and do that. So before they even come to this meeting, a lot of work has been done. Sometimes they won't come up because the ideas that we generated in those grade level meetings work. It just kind of depends on the student.

Respondent #4: I would add that I have teachers either in the grade level meetings or coming to me personally saying, "I have this new kid, there's something about him/her, they are really high, you know, you talked about a kid like that underground kid, I think he might be this." I am constantly having teachers coming up to me saying, "Could we just check this kid out? I'm not sure – he laughs at all of my jokes when nobody else does and you said that was a trait (lots of laughter from the team) so will you look at him or her?" So sometimes it is through that RtI process where it's at the grade level meetings, sometimes it's directly just coming to me saying, "I just want to ask a really quick-kind of thing." I am very impressed with this school and with this staff about how knowledgeable they are with gifted kids and how important that is for them – they're not just saying, "Oh, they're high, they're doing fine, I need to concentrate on others." This staff really works on both ends to make sure that all their needs are met.

What do you identify as the greatest promise in using PST data to serve the needs of advanced learners? The principal responded, "I think the greatest promise is that teachers can generalize it to the rest of their class. Taking a lot of those strategies that they use for the advanced kids and using them class-wide. Using the right kinds of questioning, trying to push their thinking. We cluster group, too, this year. So trying to help those teachers understand – there's a difference between gifted kids on an ALP and

high achieving kids looking like those kids. Those high achieving kids or even those kids that are on the bubble are in a class without those ALP kids... they will rise and shoot up, too. And that's kind of what I was saying about generalizing – stuff that you learn about gifted kids that you can use with all of your students.

Two of the problem-solving team members responded to the question:

Respondent #1: One of the things that I really see with the RtI process and gifted learners help in furthering one of my goals for the school is... we do have a lot of high ability students who are identified or we know that they're capable, but they're not producing. So I really feel that this process could be a really good venue for those kids to say these are our underachieving students – these are students that we should be seeing a lot more out of – and what do we do with them? So we bring them through that process to make that they don't slip through the cracks just because they are on grade level. They should be higher than that and I think this could be a good catch for those students.

Respondent #2: I think another thing with RtI is that because of it, we've really started getting a baseline on all students. So we started formally progress monitoring this year and we are getting that preliminary data that can then just start to identify some of those kids – bring them to our attention a little bit more, so that they don't just fall through the cracks. We have something to compare that child to with all the other kids in our school that can identify those outliers.

Finally, the focus group lent credence to the use of the RtI framework in meeting the needs of advanced learners when they were asked to “describe how the staff at this school approaches meeting the needs of all learners, particularly high potential learners.”

This exchange ensued:

Respondent #1: I think that our staff does a really good job of having students come up through their grade level and saying, “There's something about this kid; I'm not quite sure yet what it is.” We've done a lot of professional development here on what a gifted child is, different traits of giftedness... gifted students who are underachievers, how they can totally go under the radar. We have teachers that say, “I'm not quite sure about this kid, but this sounds like maybe an underachiever; there's something more going on.” I think that their education and their experiences really train them to see that – and not to miss those kids. So they're really coming to the process saying, “We need to do something with this

kid – I don't think they're working up to their potential." So bringing that to the RtI process: "Yes, the student is on grade level – but should be doing much more." They don't just say the kid's on grade level and we're good... they see that potential, they see something else is there. They are asking, "What can we do more? How can we challenge them – they should be reading two years above, they should be doing better on the DRA, on their writing essays." I have to give credit to the staff – they are really able to recognize that and bring that up through the process to meet those needs.

Respondent #2: I think also – when the gifted education specialist started here, she wasn't just in her room doing just her gifted education stuff. She was a big part of the school. I think that really helps because she's having conversations all day long with different teachers about identifying higher kids or she'll engage in problem solving with a special education staff member sometimes, too! She's so approachable that people feel like they want to talk to her and ask her questions. And that's a big thing, I think. She's interacting with all the teachers in the whole building and that's great. That really makes a difference.

Respondent #3: One thing I'm impressed with is the flexibility of the teachers at this school to have a lot of different things going on. I'll go on into classrooms and ask kids "what are you doing?" Oh, you're working on your facts. What are you doing? And they're all doing something else – and I think that's really difficult to do and hard to let go of the control by kind of the chaos that develops with all that and I'm very impressed with the teachers' ability to do that. Meet all those needs and be okay with what that looks like.

Respondent #1: I absolutely agree with that – seeing all of the different reading groups and math groups. I go into a room and I'm just so impressed. And it's not just you have middle kids and your low kids. They've got the low, they've got the on grade level, and then they've got the high. And in one teacher's class – walking in there and seeing 6 different reading groups and 6 different math groups. I have to tell him, "It's okay! You can combine some of those kids!" I'm so impressed that it's not just, okay, here are your grade level kids and here's your high group. There are many classes in this school who have two or three groups for their high kids. We've got our outliers and our "just above" and we've got our high. So sometimes there are three different reading groups just for high kids. I see it all around this building. It's very cool to see...

Respondent #2: I think also teachers here are just really good at looking at their class and knowing they've got to do things differently some years – depending on the dynamics. You can't always do it the same way you've done it every year. If you've got a group of maybe a lot of special needs learners, and some high kids – and trying to figure out how to do that, it's probably going to be a little different

than the year before when maybe you had a group of kids in a pretty similar range.

What role does leadership play in ensuring effective implementation for all learners? Site-based leadership was an essential component in this school's efforts with effective implementation of the RtI framework in meeting the continuum of learners they serve. The interviews with the principal and the PST as well as the focus group session bore this out.

The interview conducted with the principal was illustrative of this point in multiple responses to the questions posed. When asked what he looks for when he walks into a classroom, he cited specifics in terms of instruction. He said:

I look for the engagement, I look for rigorous activities, I look for teachers that are engaged with their kids... not sitting behind a desk. I want teachers out there, I want teacher interacting with kids, you know. I look for what's up on the walls... the wall is your second teacher. What is it that they're displaying? Are they displaying kids work that's great – and if they've got a couple of posters... but if I see chart paper with “boo-boo” tape and all corrections and things like that and y'know mistakes and correcting mistakes and edits and all that kind of thing – that's the stuff I look for and that's the stuff I love to see in the classroom.

In response to a follow up statement about the intervention specialist who works with staff and students along the continuum of learners, it was noted that she garners a great deal of respect from the staff. The principal stated:

It's always been like that – from the get-go with her and I, that's what I expected; I did not want her pulling tons of kids out of the classroom or whatever, sometimes it's appropriate and sometime it's not. It's getting in and it's one of the “C's”– communication, collaboration, critical thinking and creativity. It's kinda happenin'!! I think it's great! At our school we haven't had a big push for this, we've just kinda been “slippin' in” (noting his leadership style, bringing about change slowly, in small chunks)!

His leadership was also evident in explaining how the RtI framework and problem-solving team process has evolved during his tenure at the school. He indicated his very strong belief that RtI is about all students:

That is another thing that I'm like, we have to have these specialists there so we can talk about all kids because before it was the team leader saying, "We can't talk about sped kids because you have to go to the case manager... we just talk about regular ed(ucation) kids." "No. *RtI is everybody.*" If you're having an issue with a sped kid – whatever information you might be talking about, whatever issue... that other teacher is thinking well that makes sense – I could use that strategy in my own instruction whether the kid's sped or not. It has really become that whole team approach to talking about what kids need. And it's not based on any type of a label or any type of identification. It just kind of opens up. So when I've allowed sped to go in there and we talk about *all* kids – It's not: that's sped, keep it separate; that's ESL; oh, that's GT (gifted education). We are all kinda talkin' and it just kind of changes how we look at kids... and we think. We kind of generalize... oh, behavior – maybe it's *not* something going on at home or the kid is just a bad kid. Maybe there's something going on with *our* instruction maybe *I'm* not doing something right in the classroom. I think it just kind of opens it up.

The PST interview provided clear evidence of the importance of the role of the building leader in success of their RtI process. The members of the team referred to the support of the principal and the building resource teacher throughout the interview session. For example, when talking about parent and staff satisfaction at the site, one respondent noted, "It's very friendly, the office staff is friendly... and I think our principal is a great leader and we have the building resource teacher who is here leading us too, and the intervention specialist... and it feels good – to me. I think maybe that feels good to parents, as well."

Another PST member talked about leadership as it related to support of the RtI process in this way: We meet every Tuesday, and we meet every Thursday, and talk about kids and just the way that everything has evolved and we've kind of grown. And

just basically through everybody's expertise and sharing and collaborating I think our greatest celebration is basically on how much more we know collectively (nodding and agreement from other team members), and about how much more we can do to really meet their needs. And, I mean, that a tribute to everybody here – Educational Assistants as well as teachers and administration.

A key example of the importance of the role of leadership and the relationships forged among the staff was evidenced by the principal's own words. He said, "I am so proud and I celebrate all of you here at this table and everybody else in this building. There have been many days throughout the time I've been here I've wanted to give up... because it's a hard job... but it's you guys that make me want to come to work. There are no pockets of excellence here – the entire school IS the pocket of excellence. I think everybody is excellent in this building and brings something. Sure, we have our bumps in the road, but, um, I can't be more proud – and I celebrate you guys."

Finally, the focus group solidified the notion that building leadership was essential to their efforts in serving all of the students at their school. Responses throughout the interview referred to the role of leadership. In addition, the group was specifically asked to respond to the question, "How has the environment established by leadership guided the staff in moving through the challenges of using this process to meet the needs of high potential learners?" The transcribed responses follow:

Respondent #1: I think the first thing was saying – knowing that leadership and the principal in particular said... me walking into this building the first day and saying that these high ability learners are important, that this is an underserved population and he knew that and knew that they needed as much as our other kids who struggle. So I think having that attitude, first of all just coming in and knowing that... being in other schools where maybe leadership doesn't

understand GT (gifted education), doesn't understand the needs, what that looks like, you just pull them out for a puzzle for y'know half an hour a day (laughs) something like that. So that was huge for me walking into a school with that. And not only that, but I did come in with some ideas and said that I think we need to try this, I know you do Junior Great Books, but let's take it all the way down into kindergarten... and having the willingness to just say to the principal, "I want to try this, let's institute this, let's put this in place." And every step of the way it has been, "Yep, okay, do it, let me know how I can support you, let me know how I can support teachers if we're going to implement this ... what can I do." So for me, in my position, that was huge to be able to say – okay, I'm going to be backed up by the administration and be able to move forward and do what I think is best for kids – and be able to have the support from him so that I could support my teachers.

Respondent #2: Our principal has not put a lot of pressure on teachers about CSAP. We talk about the good things that this school is doing and we focus on the good scores and the good growth. I think schools, if you get too much pressure on CSAP, it changes your instruction. You do a lot of worksheets, a lot of bubble in, a lot of rote learning so they can do well on the test. He's done a good job of not putting a priority on that so that teachers think that projects are fine and all those things that don't necessarily get tested on CSAP. If a teacher is doing really critical thinking questions, for those kids – he wasn't trying to get them to score on CSAP – because those kinds of questions aren't there. So I think that leaves more open to what good instruction is.

Respondent #1: I also think that giving us a chance to make some of those decisions – so instead of the principal coming down and saying we need to do this, this, this, this, and this – he brings it to our PST team. We have a retreat and we're sitting around saying, "Okay, what's a better way to progress monitor kids for these teachers. This is AIMSweb (progress monitoring tool) – is this something we're interested in, even? If you're interested let's do some training, let's figure it out – is this something we want to use?" And then I felt that we all collectively as a group – going back to our teachers and then coming back – made those decisions. And I think that those teachers and all staff members have more buy in with that when they have a part in that decision. It's not him standing up saying I need you to do this, this, this, this, and this... he said – "Here are some options, this is best practice, we need to be progress monitoring these students, how best can we do that?" And leaving it up to us. I think that's really important as a staff to have input into some of those things.

Respondent #4: You don't get the feeling that administration here is micro-managing everything. You know, you can choose whether to use the basal or the Junior Great Books or pull novels or use the TIME for Kids for lessons. It's not told or being dictated to you which ones you have to use. Even with Every Day

Math – we pretty much have to follow but for those struggling learners you have that room to go out of bounds. As long as it's good for the kids, to make them successful. When you have that kind of freedom... although it would be nice just to have manual to say this is what you need to teach day 1, day 2, day 3 (huge laughter), that would take a lot of stress and planning out of it, but I mean, you don't have that. So you have that freedom to go to resources you think you need for your kids.

Respondent #1: A couple of things... I think that it's important, when we are talking about the RtI process – both the principal and the building resource teacher said those high kids do need to come through the process. So, they don't need to go directly through the intervention specialist, there are a lot of things that can be done at those Tuesday morning (grade level) meetings. A lot of schools I don't think have even considered that, so that's made a huge difference. And then providing materials. So saying, "Yes, we need Jr. Great Books (JGB) – I will find some money." And then putting the trust in the teachers saying, "Here are all of the resources that you have for those high kids. I'm not going to say you have to use this, but if you could try some things and figure out what works best for you – in your own time." I have some teachers who have been using JGB since day one; I have some that I just trained this year on them. The principal gave us money so we have that complete set, K-6 now, along with other resources. We also have CDs for JGB for pretty much every grade level – and they are being used! There are some times where the teachers have to flip flop the materials first/second half of the year. I love walking around the hallway and seeing parent volunteers and teachers and Educational Assistants out doing those groups and high level novels.

Respondent #5: One last thing...our leadership values that collaboration and they respect people to be getting together and problem solving together and talking. It's not like: you have your class – you figure it out. Or I could just work with my little caseload (I mean my big caseload) of kids and I don't need to help in that classroom because that's not my classroom (the principal chimed in "large" caseload!!). So when you have that environment, almost every single teacher here really rises to that occasion and they want to do that. And that's great! I think that's really kind of the support that you need. You have to have people wanting to collaborate, and problem solve, and meet the needs of different learners. It's huge.

Ethnicity Data

The research question posed for this case study included two sub-questions. The second of those sub-questions asked, "How can the Response to Intervention framework

be used to support the needs of and identify ethnic minority and low socio-economic learners for gifted programming?” As discussed previously, underrepresentation of ethnic minority students for gifted programming is a long standing issue in the field of gifted education. State of Colorado ethnicity data with respect to gifted programming, included in Chapter 2, *Table 2: Colorado Ethnicity Data Relative to Gifted Students*, showed 60% of students enrolled in school were White, yet nearly 73% of students identified for gifted programming were reported in that demographic. In the district where the study was conducted, 82.5% of students enrolled were White; 77% of the students identified for gifted programming were reported as such. At the case study site, 80% of students enrolled were White, while they comprised 66% of the students identified for gifted programming.

Summary

The findings presented included data from classroom observations, interviews with teachers, problem-solving team observations and an interview session, an interview with the principal, and concluded with a focus group session. State, district and study site ethnicity data regarding students identified for gifted programming were also presented. The data was gathered in three phases, with phase one observations informing the phase two interview sessions. Phase three, the focus group session, was the culminating piece of data collection, providing context to the data gathered throughout phases one and two. As indicated by Stake (1995), “The search for meaning often is a search for patterns, for consistency, for consistency within certain conditions, which we call ‘correspondence’” (p. 78). It was this search for correspondence among the three phases of this case study

that guided next steps throughout the process, ultimately leading to the analysis, discussion and implications of the findings, as well as informing recommended next steps with regard to the effective use of the RtI framework in meeting the needs of all learners.

Chapter Five: Discussion, Implications, Conclusions and Recommendations

According to Stake (1995), “Case studies are undertaken to make the case understandable” (p. 85). Stake also noted the unique and personal nature of the case study and its findings. He stated, “Because it is an exercise in such depth, the (case) study is an opportunity to see what others have not yet seen, to reflect the uniqueness of our own lives, to engage the best of our interpretive powers, and to make, even by its integrity alone, an advocacy for those things we cherish” (p. 136). In terms of this case, the topic for understanding was the utilization of the Response to Intervention framework in meeting the needs of all learners. Further areas for exploration were the use of the framework with high potential learners, and addressing the underrepresentation of ethnic minority and low socio-economic students in gifted programs. The research points to strong leadership, knowledge of the RtI framework, relationships and collaboration among colleagues, and strong partnerships with families and the community.

Discussion of the Findings

Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasize corroboration among the sources of data. “One of the most logical sources of corroboration is the people you have talked with and watched. After all, an alert and observant actor in the setting is bound to know more than the researcher ever will about the realities under investigation” (p. 275). The teachers, PST members, principal and focus group participants provided the vehicle to gaining insight into the study site’s effective use of the RtI framework. Their depiction of the

day-to-day realities in meeting the needs of all learners garnered rich details as to why the site has been so successful in implementing and utilizing the framework with a continuum of students.

Creswell (2007) believes data analysis follows a general contour. He illustrates that contour in a spiral (Figure 3), beginning with various forms of data, and ending with a narrative account of the findings (p. 150):

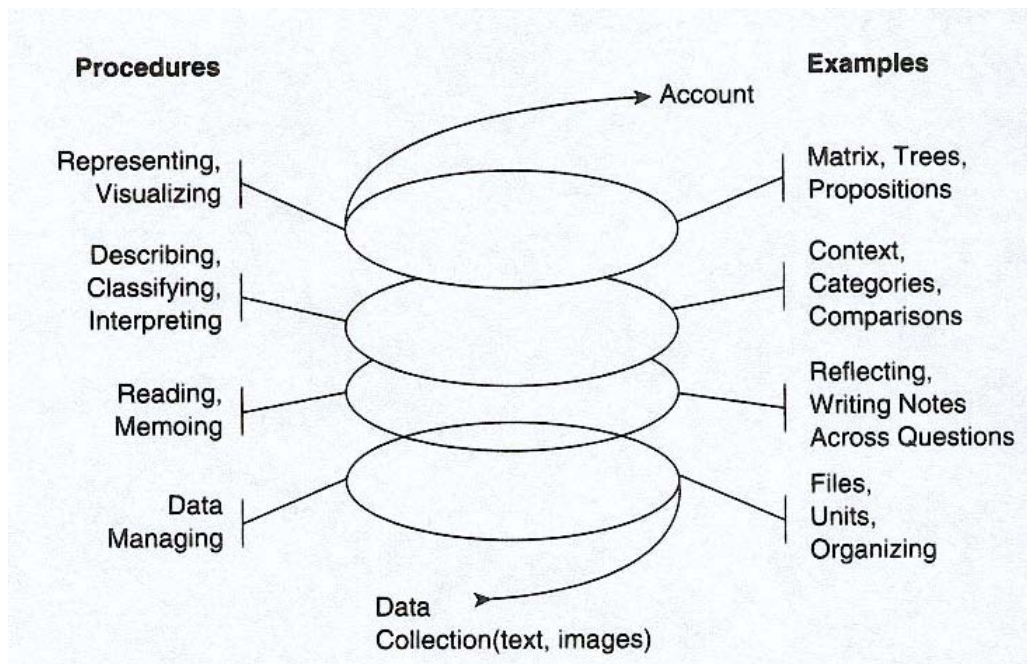


Figure 3: Creswell, (2007) *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. p. 151.

Using Yin's (2009) questions as the data analysis framework, the presentation of the patterns gleaned from the observations and interviews form the basis of corroboration for the analysis and discussion of the findings.

Pattern of observation and interview findings. Yin (2009) indicates Level 3

questions should not be examined until all data are collected from the study (p. 88). The

Level 3 questions, asked of the pattern of findings in this study, included:

- Did the pattern of findings suggest commonalities between data gathered during the classroom and PST observations and the responses during the interviews?
- Did the pattern suggest additional follow up questions to be explored with a focus group?

The data sources and themes are shown in Table 12, followed by details to provide support.

Table 12

Global Data Matrix

Data Source	Themes		
Classroom Observations	Collaboration, Questioning	Directions, Expectations	Choice and Engagement
Teacher Interviews	Collaboration, Relationships	Leadership	Choice and Engagement
PST Observations	Collaboration, Relationships	Choice and Engagement	RtI Knowledge, Strength-based
Principal Interview	Collaboration, Relationships	Choice and Engagement	RtI Knowledge, Strength-based
PST Interview	Collaborative Environment	Leadership	RtI Knowledge, Strength-based
Focus Group	Collaborative Environment	Leadership	RtI Knowledge, Strength-based

Did the pattern of findings suggest commonalities between data gathered during the classroom and PST observations and the responses during the interviews?

Phase one of the study gathered data via observation of five classrooms and two Problem-Solving Team meetings. Common elements from the observations were used to guide phase two of the study, including interviews with teachers, PST team members and the site's principal. The pattern of findings from these two phases suggested several commonalities: expectations, student engagement, collaboration, relationships, and knowledge of the Response to Intervention framework. These common themes were relevant to the study, as they provided the foundation for the study site's effective implementation of the RtI framework with all learners. The themes are further discussed below.

The interviews with teachers, the principal and the PST delved into the patterns to seek a deeper insight into their importance. During the interview with teachers, several responses pointed to the importance of really knowing the learner in order to effectively serve his or her needs. Teacher E focused on forging relationships with the learner and using objective data to guide instruction. In addition, Teacher C discussed differentiated instruction as a means to engage the learner, while Teacher A talked about informal assessments at the onset of the year and Teacher B pointed to weekly conferencing to get to know their students. Teacher D discussed pre-testing every unit to determine what her students know in order to guide her instruction. The relationships forged with students were essential in utilizing the RtI framework to meet the unique needs of their students. Each teacher participating in the study provided opportunities for students to engage with

the learning, either through a personal connection or with a prior assignment or text. In turn, this allowed the teachers to gain a keen awareness of the strengths and needs of each of the learners in the classroom. The teachers knew those students who may require additional supports as well as those who may require more depth and complexity.

During the interview with the principal, the importance of relationships and student engagement were emphasized. He talked about the relationships with families and the school community as well as relationships with the learners. He talked at length about the partnership the school has with families and the good will established by those relationships. In addition, the principal cited student engagement as one of the core “look-fors” as he visits classrooms, indicating he listens for questioning between teachers and students and from students to teachers. He looks for teachers to be up and engaged with the students in his or her classroom. He also noted that, when hiring teachers, he listens for the individual’s true love of kids and of teaching.

The PST interview reinforced the patterns of collaboration, relationships, and student engagement, as well. For example, PST respondents talked at length about the importance of collaboration. Members of the team felt the RtI process was predicated on successful and effective collaboration among all staff. Examples provided by respondents included an overall openness in sharing of strategies with grade level and PST members, willingness to seek out expertise and suggestions from the various specialists in the building, and collaborative problem solving/idea sharing at the PST meetings. Respondents indicated a climate where collaboration was the norm; it was an expectation. Respondents discussed the welcoming nature of the school, from the front

office staff to the administration, and its importance when forming positive relationships with parents. The term relationship, as used in describing the connection among the staff members, students, and families involved at the study site, goes well beyond a surface definition of the term. The principal and PST team members continually articulated the genuine care they had for each other, their students, families, and the community. While the PST process did not hinge upon on staff members “liking” one another, it was strengthened by a mutual respect for the expertise each member brought to the table, as well as a shared interest in ensuring the best possible outcome for all learners.

With respect to student engagement, respondents highlighted using various data points, including knowing the strengths of the learner as the means for tapping into potential. The team’s ability to articulate how they use and interpret data were clearly indicative of their deep knowledge of the RTI process as it relates to assessment and progress monitoring. While many instances were shared by the respondents, this statement is indicative of the collective responses of the team, “We look at the individual child. We look at the student and their strengths, their needs – whatever that is: social/emotional, if they are high, they’re low, behavior, whatever it is, and we look at that specifically.”

Did the pattern suggest additional follow up questions to be explored with a focus group? Phase three of the study utilized the data gleaned in phase two from the teacher interviews, interview with the principal, and the Problem-Solving Team interview. These data shaped the process for a focus group, leading to questions that provided further context and depth of understanding to emergent themes. The focus

group solidified a number of the findings with respect to a collaborative environment, the role of leadership in effective implementation of the framework as a strength-based approach, and knowledge of the RtI framework in general. Of particular note were the specific examples shared illustrating the collaborative nature of the staff. The leadership philosophy is one of collaborative problem solving, providing staff the opportunity to share in decisions that affect their ability to effectively serve the learners in their classrooms. This was evidenced during the focus group session when the principal stated, “But when it comes right down to it, it seems like I’m always looking at the good of people and the good of the situation, trying to come to some sort of compromise or try to do the best I can with a win-win.”

What did the findings suggest? Yin (2009) suggests Level 4 questions are those asked of the study itself, and should include a broad look at the study (p. 88). In terms of this case, those questions included:

- Was the RtI framework effective with all learners?
- Was the RtI framework effective with high potential learners?
- If so, what adjustments has this site made in order to enhance the process to include all learners?
- What has this site determined as potential issues in implementation?
- How are the findings connected to the research?

Was the RtI framework effective with all learners? The study site’s use of the Response to Intervention framework was clearly effective with all learners. The framework provided teachers with the structure for a three-tiered instructional approach wherein the universal classroom setting was designed to incorporate open-ended

questioning, ongoing formative assessment and progress monitoring, scaffolding and extensions, and high expectations for all. Teachers met weekly in grade level teams to discuss students' needs, instructional and intervention strategies and how to maximize their use of curricular materials. Targeted and intensive interventions were provided when additional supports were required whether students were struggling or needed extended content. When talking about the RtI framework, one staff member noted, "I think we're learning a lot more about different kinds of learners and learning more about how to meet their needs. I think it has helped us also learn how to talk about a continuum of learners." Teachers were not only free to use a variety of curricular materials to meet the diverse needs of the learners in their classrooms; they were supported in their efforts through the availability of resources and professional development opportunities, as well.

The framework provided the site-based Problem-Solving Team with the structure for a data-driven, collaborative problem-solving process to discuss students' needs. The process was clearly delineated with expectations in terms of the steps necessary before referring a student to the team for further discussion. Several members of the PST articulated the importance of the interpretation of data and how best to use it to drive next steps. The grade level team meetings were noted as a required component of the process, providing teachers the venue to problem solve and try strategies with students immediately; there was no need to wait until the next PST meeting and certainly no requirement for any formal identification prior to providing the students with the intervention or instruction needed. Teacher D summed this up articulately when she said, "As the PST has evolved, it has evolved to better meet the needs of the kids that we're

seeing in the classroom. And so for me it's moved from 'this is all just special education identification' to now this is looking at all types of kids; kids that maybe have some behavioral concerns, maybe some need to be advanced – you know, just different kinds of learners; it's not just specifically based on special education anymore.”

Was the RtI framework effective with high potential learners? High potential learners were identified and supported through the site's use of the framework. Teachers routinely sought out the intervention specialist to provide consultation and collaboration for differentiated instructional strategies to use with students in the universal classroom setting. When a student demonstrated the need for something more targeted or intensive, teachers collaborated with teammates and the specialist to extend the content and provide more depth and complexity in the student's area of strength. The intervention specialist indicated, “For example, we have a student who is new in 4th grade and we're seeing just amazing things from this kid, and so we are bringing him up through the process starting the next meeting, but we've already got him flexing up because we've already gathered that data. So we're going to bring him through and make sure we stay on that.” Students already identified for gifted programming were supported through the process in a variety of ways, as well. The staff was cognizant of the unique social and emotional needs of gifted learners and used both the weekly team meetings and the PST meetings to discuss appropriate strategies to address those needs. The learning specialist pointed out, “Every Tuesday we're in grade level meetings – and I'm in a group, too, all of the specialists are – and we're just problem solving kids, and when a teacher had a high student who was having behavior issues, we tried to figure out some motivational stuff and different things

he could do with that student.” Again, the purpose was clear: problem solving the needs of the learner was the value, not the label or level of the student.

What adjustments has this site made in order to enhance the process to include all learners? The leadership provided by the site’s principal, building resource teacher and RtI intervention specialist coupled with a dedicated group of teachers was the impetus for adjusting the RtI process to include all learners. The composition of the site-based problem-solving team was adjusted to include gifted education and ESL specialists, classroom teachers, and special education staff, signaling to the whole staff the importance of the process in meeting the needs of all learners. The principal was clear, “We have to have these specialists there so we can talk about all kids. Before, the team leader was saying ‘we can’t talk about sped kids because you have to go to the case manager... we just talk about regular ed kids.’ ‘No. RtI is everybody.’”

The meeting structure in the building was adjusted to provide time for teams to meet weekly and for the PST to meet three or four times per month. The message from building leaders was clear: we discuss all students whose needs aren’t being met. Classroom teachers had high expectations for all learners, from those who struggle to those who are advanced, and they knew they would be provided with support in order to address the diverse learning needs along that continuum. The intervention specialist was viewed as an invaluable asset at the study site. One focus group team member noted, “When the RtI interventionist started here as the gifted specialist, she was very visible – she wasn’t in her room doing just her ‘GT’ stuff – y’know – she was a big part of the school. She’s having conversations all day long with different teachers about higher kids

or she'll engage in problem solving about all kids.” The team members talked about the adjustment as a change in thinking: raising the level of expectation for the absolute highest learners, not lowering them for the struggling learners. One PST member said, “You do it the other way. And then the other kids respond.”

The school site made it a priority to attend to the needs of gifted learners, retaining the gifted education specialist when other sites cut those positions due to budgetary concerns. The role of the gifted education specialist was expanded to RtI intervention specialist, supporting the needs of all learners. The principal showed further support of and commitment to gifted learners incorporating a cluster grouping model in several classrooms. The RtI interventionist gathered information and research supporting the model in meeting the needs of gifted students by utilizing existing staff. While the principal noted “selling” the idea to staff was a challenge at first, his support of the idea and the expertise of the interventionist allowed for implementation of the model. Rather than cutting programming and services to the site’s gifted learners, the principal put the personnel, structures and support in place to enhance them.

What has this site determined as potential issues in implementation? The site’s RtI process was fully implemented at the time of the study, with a defined structure and process in place. The leadership team and staff were aware of the flexibility required to change pieces of the process along the way, as needs and difficulties arose. The leadership team was purposeful in making incremental changes over time, based on staff readiness, and then provided the support to ensure those changes became part of practice. Because the process was embedded in the school’s day-to-day operations, expanding the

framework to include students beyond those who may eventually require special education services was not perceived as a problem or concern. The principal noted, “I don’t know if I really see a huge challenge with that because it’s been working so well here.” When talking about possible pitfalls for other school sites, he went on to indicate, “...one of the challenges might be teachers opening their minds to see that this framework can be used for the advanced kids, too.” Teachers and other staff members must be open to using this process as a way to tap into a student’s potential and to feed that potential.

How are the findings connected to the research? The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) points to the importance of the framework in meeting the needs of all learners by virtue of its definition: “Response to Intervention is a framework that promotes a well-integrated system connecting general, compensatory, gifted and special education in providing high quality, standards-based instruction and intervention that is matched to students’ academic, social/emotional, and behavioral needs” (2008). The essential components and hallmarks of the Response to Intervention framework are noted throughout the research (VanDerHeyden, Witt & Gilbertson, 2006; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Kratochwill et al., 2007). The authors stress the importance of effective instruction, problem solving, and progress monitoring data to inform decisions. The Colorado Department of Education (CDE, 2008) also includes the role of leadership and partnerships with families and the community as essential in ensuring an effective process. Findings from the data gathered at the study site corroborated its use of the RtI framework as it was intended. This was evidenced through its use of effective

instructional practices in the universal setting, a collaborative problem-solving process incorporating data to inform decisions, leadership support, and strong connections with families and the community.

Implications

Level 5 questions, according to Yin (2009), are those that go beyond the narrow scope of the study (p. 87) and provide context regarding the broader implications of the study (p. 88). In this case, asking the “so what” of the study. These included:

- Are the findings transferable?
- Did the findings support the use of an RtI framework with high potential/highly able learners district wide?
- Were the findings such that a change in practices for identifying gifted learners should be explored by the district?
- Has the study provided insight into the underrepresentation of ethnic minority and low SES students in gifted programming?

Are the findings transferable? This case study explored one school’s processes in embedding the RtI framework school wide. The study provided lessons learned from this site’s principal, teachers, and problem-solving team. While the findings are not generalizable to the population, the lessons learned can be used to improve practices at schools with the essential components in place. For example, effective implementation at the study site was directly attributed to a committed staff, strong leadership support, and an understanding of the components of the process. At the classroom level, the findings suggested strong universal instruction, high expectations and questioning techniques to engage all learners, and building a community of learners were essential to creating a climate wherein all students can grow as learners. In addition, the findings pointed to a

commitment from all staff in problem solving the needs of the students they serve. In order to transfer the findings to other schools, unflagging commitment to ensuring growth for all students is non-negotiable. In the words of one of the study participants, “That ability to not give up and say ‘well this problem can’t be solved.’ We just keep re-going over the kids. There are some kids we’ve been talking about since Kindergarten and we haven’t yet solved the problem – yet we keep bringing them up, we keep trying new things. There’s always a solution.”

Did the findings support the use of an RtI framework with high potential/high ability learners district wide? The findings did support the use of the framework with high ability learners district wide. As school teams continue to embed the RtI framework in their day-to-day practice, expanding its use for high ability learners is a next step in the implementation process. Given the inclusion of gifted learners in the Colorado Department of Education’s definition of Response to Intervention, the district would be remiss were it not to include high potential/high ability learners in the process. As noted in the findings, sites will require professional development in this area, providing school teams with support in shifting the thinking regarding RtI as a process for struggling learners to that of a potential-based model, using the process as a way to discover and mine student potential.

Were the findings such that a change in practices for identifying gifted learners should be explored by the district? The district’s stated identification process at the time of the study included utilization of a body of evidence to support the students’ area(s) of demonstrated strengths. The process in practice at the time of the study,

however, relied heavily on testing results to “qualify” students for programming. A shift in the process to nurturing the potential of all learners, incorporating the RtI framework, is called for. The findings from the study site indicated successful use of the RtI framework to discover potential in all students. At the study site, the framework was utilized as the means to providing high potential learners with more depth and complexity, monitoring the progress of the learner’s response to more challenging work, and gathering objective data to determine the significance of the needs of the learner. This potential-based process led to programming designed to serve the needs of all learners.

Has the study provided insight into the underrepresentation of ethnic minority and low SES students in gifted programming? The study did not provide direct insight into the underrepresentation of ethnic minority and low SES students in gifted programming. This was true for two reasons. One, the framework had not been used long enough with high potential learners to draw any conclusions regarding underrepresentation in gifted programming. Two, the site’s enrollment did not include sufficient numbers of ethnically diverse students to make any statements regarding the utility of the framework in addressing underrepresentation. The study did, however, provide promising practices in this area. With a focus on the potential of all learners, teachers and support staff engage all students in open-ended questioning, tap into the interests of all learners, and are open to providing any student who demonstrates potential with content extensions. The findings suggest that with these practices routinely in place,

a more proportional representation of the school site's demographics engaged in programming to serve high potential learners is a possible outcome.

Conclusions

The ultimate goal is to more effectively meet the needs of all learners, including students who demonstrate high potential. Test scores alone do not provide us with the data to inform what we actually *do* in terms of our instructional practices in working with these students. The case study was undertaken to provide insights in using the Response to Intervention framework as a more effective means to providing high ability learners with the support they need to realize their potential.

The research question, "How can the Response to Intervention framework be utilized to support the needs of all learners?" cannot be fully answered based on a single case study; however, the promising practices being successfully utilized at the case study site provide a template from which to start. The research points to strong leadership, knowledge of the RtI framework, relationships and collaboration among colleagues, and strong partnerships with families and the community. The study site breathes life into those words and takes them from the pages of journal articles and guidebooks and places them directly in our view finder. One study participant, when asked what she would identify as the greatest celebration at the study site, said:

This is a celebration that's waiting to happen. And that's (student name). A kid that came to us in 2nd grade – he was in the office within three minutes of when he walked in the school. Brand new kid – we got no background knowledge, nothing. And we have worked and worked and worked with this little boy. He's still struggling... he has gone to testing, and I'm sure that we're going to continue to work with him. But he came in... I don't think he was ever in class in 1st grade. I don't think he ever stayed in class. I think he got kicked out of class every day – a file this thick of "bad things." We looked at him to see if he might

be gifted, we've looked at this, we've looked at that... and he stays in class most of the day now (laughter). It's very hard – but *we will not give up*, and that's what I'm celebrating is: the student is still here, we're still working with him... That's a celebration to me to know that he's loved, he's cared about, he drives you nuts but everybody loves him. Y'know he's pretty special.

In terms of using the RtI framework for high potential/high ability learners, the case study site again paints a picture of promise. They are using the framework to effectively serve high ability learners. They are seeking, noticing, and nurturing potential and tapping into the expertise of the staff to support the growth of the learner. This support is not predicated on a label or identification for a specific program; rather, it is provided based on the demonstrated needs of the learner. This is a shift in thinking from a static identification process with an associated label or classification to a model that seeks and nurtures the potential of all learners; a potential-based model.

The intervention specialist, who supported teachers with strategies for high potential and gifted learners as well as worked with previously identified gifted learners, articulated the process this way:

I would say that we have these difficult students that have some major academic issues... emotional issues... behavior issues. Those are all students that are on my “watch” list or have been identified. So instead of being bogged down by, you know, she's screaming and yelling at people... instead of concentrating on those things – which would be very easy to do – I have other support specialists in the building coming to me saying, “Have you seen her writing?” “Have you seen her ‘this’ or how she talks about ‘that’?” So then I go and check her out – and one particular student is now on an IEP and she's identified as gifted and she will now have an Advanced Learning Plan. She's a twice exceptional student. The same was true with another student. When he first started he was down in the office quite a bit... I had a staff member come to me and say, “So we have this kid and you should hear the language he uses to get out of a situation. He goes into these explanations and he's very manipulative and you just listen to him and go “wow, that's pretty impressive how he does that!” So I consistently have other people in the building coming to me saying, “You know we have these difficult kids but I think it might be a gifted kid.” Or – I've done some professional

development on the correlation between ADHD and gifted kids. Sometimes there's a fine line between the two and we have to really look at that and separate that out. So I have teachers come to me and say, "I've got this hyper kid, and I'm not sure – he laughs at all of my jokes when nobody else does and you said that was a trait, so will you look at him or her?" So it's very cool to see that yes, there are issues. These teachers are dealing with all these other students and they're very bogged down and those are difficult students, but in the midst of all of that – in all they have to do – they are still bringing those kids through the process or coming to me and saying "there's something about this kid, they're very bright, they might need a little extra." Or focusing, especially in the RtI process, on their strengths or on their interests. If they have a student who won't read, but they love motorcycles, we're going to work on getting different materials for them, whether it's magazines – whatever it is. So the teachers use those strengths to help them with the deficits that the students may have. I see that going on all the time. Teachers going way above and beyond, bringing stuff from home, even purchasing things for students because of their interests. They do this because of their dedication to *whatever it is* as a tool to say "we need to use their strengths to help them rise above their deficits."

Recommendations for Further Studies

Lessons learned from the study will be shared with classroom teachers and the principal at the case study site, as well as with district leaders and other school sites, ultimately leading to a potential-based process in order to plan for and serve the needs of all learners in the district.

The connection of professional development to fidelity of implementation, effective instruction and intervention, and ultimately positive student outcomes is highlighted throughout the literature (Kratochwill, Volpiansky, Clements & Ball, 2007; Danielson, Doolittle, & Bradley, 2007; Shinn, 2007). In order for school personnel to engage in a process providing evidence-based instruction, ongoing progress monitoring, and collaboration regarding instructional decisions based on data, they must have the capacity to function at the highest levels in those roles (Danielson et al., 2007; Kratochwill et al., 2007).

Further, teachers will be more likely to implement interventions and other components of a potential-based model if they have explicit training and follow up support in the form of resources, both human and material, scheduling, and leadership (Glover & DiPerna, 2007; Burns et al., 2008).

Ongoing embedded and targeted professional development of this nature will be required in the following areas to ensure effective use of the framework as a potential-based model:

- recognizing potential in students from the dominant culture and students from ethnic minorities and lower socio-economic status;
- knowledge of appropriate instructional strategies to use with high potential learners; and
- building a body of data to inform programming for high potential learners.

Teachers must be provided with opportunities to develop the attributes and practices of exemplary teachers. These practices must be defined, celebrated, and shared with other staff members in a purposeful manner. One time in-service trainings or isolated conferences have proven ineffective in bringing about sustainable change. In recommending professional development in the above-stated areas, the researcher cautions that unless professional development is embedded in other elements of the school, such as student schedules, structures for collaboration, curriculum, instruction and assessment, these will not prove to be sustainable practices (Kratowill et al., 2007).

The findings of this study alone, while promising, were not able to provide definitive conclusions regarding the utility of RtI framework in meeting the needs of all

learners. Expansion of the findings beyond the study site will require further research.

Suggestions for further studies include:

- expanding the study to include a greater number of school sites, examining the role of: leadership, knowledge of the RtI framework, collaboration among staff, and partnerships with families and the community as they relate to the use of the RtI framework as a potential-based model;
- extending the study over a period of three to five years to examine the utility of the framework as a potential-based model; and
- conducting a longitudinal study to expressly examine the use of the framework as it relates to the underrepresentation of ethnic minority and low SES students in programming addressing high potential.

The field can expect further exploration of the Response to Intervention framework as a means to ensuring positive outcomes for all learners.

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Appendix A

Observation Protocol

Classroom Observation		
Teacher, Grade Level _____ Date, Time _____		
Element	Observation Notes	Reflective Notes
Time		
Opportunities		
Routines and Structures		
Language		
Modeling		
Interactions and Relationships		
Physical Environment		
Expectations		
Other Observations/ Summary		

Observation Protocol

Problem-Solving Team Observation		
Date, Time _____		
Element	Observation Notes	Reflective Notes
Physical Environment Interactions/Relationships		
Process ➤ Time ➤ Opportunities ➤ Modeling		
Language/Expectations RtI Components ➤ Three-Tiered Model ➤ Assessment/Screening ➤ Data Driven Instruction ➤ Progress Monitoring ➤ Family Partnerships ➤ Fidelity of Implementation		
General Observations		
Summary		

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Teacher Interview Questions	
Question or Prompt:	Response Notes
Tell me about your background knowledge of RtI (when/how you first became aware of the framework; over time, how implementation of the process has taken shape in your classroom, etc.).	
Describe how you determine what your students know and are able to do.	
What do you identify as the most important aspect in identifying a student for gifted programming?	
What do you identify as the greatest challenges in meeting the needs of the advanced learners in your classroom?	
Talk about how you differentiate instruction for the advanced learners in your classroom.	
Additional Follow-up Questions:	
Interview Summary	

Interview Protocol

Principal Interview Questions	
Question or Prompt:	Response Notes
Talk about parent satisfaction and involvement at your site.	
What are you looking for as you observe in classrooms?	
When initially implementing the RtI framework, how did you “sell” the staff as to its merits?	
How has the PST process changed conversations among staff at your site?	
How does the PST process differ for high ability learners versus struggling learners?	
What do you identify as the greatest challenge in using this process to identify the needs of advanced learners?	
What do you identify as the greatest promise in using PST data to serve the needs of advanced learners?	
What is your greatest celebration as the leader of this school?	
Additional Questions:	
Interview Summary	

Interview Protocol

Problem-Solving Team Interview Questions	
Question or Prompt:	Response Notes
Talk about how the PST process has changed conversations among staff at the site	
Describe how this process differs for high ability learners versus struggling learners.	
What do you identify as the greatest challenges in using this process to identify the needs of advanced learners?	
What do you identify as the greatest promise in using PST data to serve the needs of advanced learners?	
Additional Questions:	
Interview Summary	

Interview Protocol

Focus Group Interview Questions	
Question or Prompt:	Response Notes
Talk about how the RtI framework has changed conversations about students at this school.	
Describe how the staff at this school approaches meeting the needs of all learners.	
How has the environment established by leadership guided the staff in moving through the challenges of using this process to meet the needs of high potential learners?	
Talk about how the collaborative nature of this staff allows for the process to be strength-based and appropriate for meeting the needs of high potential learners?	
Additional Questions: What additional thoughts and ideas do you want to be sure I capture?	
Interview Summary	

Appendix C

Observation Data Matrix *Classroom*

Cultural Forces Elements	Classroom A	Classroom B	Classroom C	Classroom D	Classroom E	
Time	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	
Opportunity	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	
Routines/Structures	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	
Language	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	
Modeling	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	
Interactions	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	
Physical Environment	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	
Expectations	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	
General Observations	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =	
Overall Themes/Patterns:						
	A	B	C	D	E	Totals
	1 =	1 =	1 =	1 =	1 =	1 =
	2 =	2 =	2 =	2 =	2 =	2 =
	3 =	3 =	3 =	3 =	3 =	3 =

1 = Choice/Engagement/Connections; 2 = Expectations/Directions; 3 = Small Group/Individualized instruction

Observation Data Matrix
Problem-Solving Team

Elements	Observation 1	Observation 2
Physical Environment Interactions/ Relationships	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =
Process ➤ Time ➤ Opportunities ➤ Modeling	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =
Language/Expectations RtI Components ➤ Three-Tiered Model ➤ Assessment/Screening ➤ Data Driven Instruction ➤ Progress Monitoring ➤ Family Partnerships Fidelity of Implementation	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =
General Observations	1 = 2 = 3 =	1 = 2 = 3 =
Overall Themes/Patterns:		
Observation 1	Observation 2	Totals
1 =	1 =	1 =
2 =	2 =	2 =
3 =	3 =	3 =

1 = Strength-based; 2 = Data/RtI Elements; 3 = Collaboration/Relationships

Interview Data Matrix
Teacher and Problem-Solving Team

Question or Prompt:	Tchr A	Tchr B	Tchr C	Tchr D	Tchr E	PST
Tell me about your background knowledge of Response to Intervention.	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =
Describe how you determine what your students know and are able to do.	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =
What do you identify as the most important aspect in identifying a student for gifted programming?	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =
What do you identify as the greatest challenges in meeting the needs of the advanced learners in your classroom?	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =
Talk about how you differentiate instruction for the advanced learners in your classroom.	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =
Describe how this process differs for high ability learners versus struggling learners.	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =
Talk about how the PST process has changed conversations among staff at the site	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =
What do you identify as the greatest challenges in using this process to identify the needs of advanced learners?	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =
What do you identify as the greatest promise in using PST data to serve the needs of advanced learners?	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =	1 = 2 = 3 = 4 =
Summary of data:						
1 =		3 =				
2 =		4 =				

1 = Staff; 2 = Environment/Collaboration; 3 = Leadership; 4 = RtI Components

Appendix D

INFORMED CONSENT FORM Response to Intervention and All Learners Case Study

You are invited to participate in a Case Study that will examine the use of the Response to Intervention framework in meeting the needs of all learners. In addition, this study is being conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The study is conducted by Robin Carey who can be reached at robin.carey@du.edu. This project is supervised by Dr. Kent Seidel, Program Chair and Associate Professor, Educational Administration Program, Morgridge College of Education, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80208 (kent.seidel@du.edu).

This study will be conducted over several months, from August, 2010 through January, 2011. The study will include classroom and Problem-Solving Team observations, one-on-one interviews, and focus groups. Participation in this project is strictly voluntary. The risks associated with this project are minimal. If, however, you experience discomfort you may discontinue participation at any time. The researcher respects your right to choose not to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your responses will be identified by code number only and will be kept separate from information that could identify you. This is done to protect the confidentiality of your responses. Only the researcher will have access to your individual data and any reports generated as a result of this study will use only group averages and paraphrased wording. However, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. Although no questions in this interview address it, we are required by law to tell you that if information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the interview, please contact Susan Sadler, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-3454, or Sylk Sotto-Santiago, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 303-871-4052 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-4820.

You may keep this page for your records. Please sign the next page if you understand and agree to the above. If you do not understand any part of the above statement, please ask the researcher any questions you have.

I have read and understood the foregoing descriptions of the study called Response to Intervention and All Learners. I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature _____ Date _____

I agree to be audio-recorded.

I do not agree to be audio-recorded.

Signature _____ Date _____

I would like a summary of the results of this study to be mailed to me at the following postal or e-mail address: