

**Bridging the Gap Between Theory and Practice:
Getting Started**

by

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Abstract

Educators are often inundated with educational initiatives, however due to a number of challenges the theory often does not trickle down into the classroom. A lack of leadership, organization, staff turnover, and the limited number of educators who participate in professional development result in many educational initiatives failing before they get off the ground. My project focused on creating a LiveBinder of resources to support teaching and learning in the schools - with the intent of helping shift theory into practice. The binder organizes and stores schoolboard endorsed educational documents online and they can be shared with colleagues, therefore creating a toolbox of practical resources. The project was carried out over a 16-week semester. The three goals of my project were to (1) conduct a review of literature regarding Response to Intervention and Professional Learning Communities, (2) create an online, organized LiveBinder with documents intended to improve teaching and learning, and reflecting on the information compiled in the LiveBinder I created a (3) comprehensive, Phase 1 Response to Intervention Implementation Plan for the 2017-2018 school year – turning theory into practice. This review of literature, LiveBinder and the Phase 1 Response to Intervention Plan will be shared with all the resource teachers and principals in my schoolboard. The results of the project created a stepping stone to start the gradual implementation of RTI, school-wide.

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Introduction

Our schoolboard has provided professional development for a significant number of educational initiatives. The management at our schoolboard believes it is important to train the principals, the educational leaders, before or along with the teachers. We have been asked to start implementing Response to Intervention in our schools. I have attended a number of professional development sessions during the past year, but we are presently viewing Response to Intervention from the theory phase. Many educational initiatives have the potential to increase academic success, however every school is diverse with unique school cultures and challenges that may impact the implementation of Response to Intervention. For my project, I have decided to review the current literature, draw on my 25 years of teaching experience, and the multitude of professional development sessions I have attended, and start turning the theory of Response to Intervention into practice in our classrooms.

The three goals of my project were to (1) conduct a review of literature regarding Response to Intervention (RTI) and Professional Learning Communities (PLC), (2) create an online, organized LiveBinder with documents intended to improve teaching and learning, and reflecting upon the information compiled in the LiveBinder I (3) created a comprehensive, Phase 1 Response to Intervention Implementation Plan for the 2017-2018 school year – turning theory into practice.

Significant challenges interfere with turning theory into practice in many schools. These challenges include mounds of research-based educational initiatives sitting in filing cabinets, short-term professional development opportunities that lack follow-up, and an absence of opportunities for in-school sharing of learning. In addition,

time constraints and constant interruptions frequently interfere with the planning and implementation of educational initiatives.

Professional development does not always trickle down into classroom practices. Too often, educators wait for someone else to start the process. Momentum for new initiatives can suffer during times of staff turnover. Teachers are often unsure of where to find resources, while leadership is not always focused on the promotion and support of innovative initiatives. Staff members may become mired in traditional or comfortable classroom methods, and may not be invested in new approaches due to a resistance for change.

Educators and students benefit from structured planning and careful organization when undertaking a change in classroom practices or initiatives. It is the intent of this project to create an organizational and informational framework to provide resources and tools for resource teachers and administrators within our schoolboard and through the literature review and consolidation of documents - move more efficiently towards the implementation of RTI in our classes.

This project will focus on creating a LiveBinder of resources to support the improvement of teaching and learning with the intent of helping shift theory into practice. Our schoolboard covers a very large territory and with the turnover in teaching positions, it is important to have a document which can be shared and continually improved upon. No two schools or classrooms have the exact same needs; therefore, the binder is intended to be a platform covering a number of educational philosophies supported by the educators within our schoolboard - with the intent of sharing information and learning from each other. The binder will continue to be a living document, and frequently updated.

Literature Review

Introduction

The area of focus of this micro-review of the literature is to gain a deeper understanding of RTI and PLC. To reduce the risk of failure during the RTI implementation process is it vital to understand the research literature concerning RTI. While researching RTI, it quickly became evident that RTI requires collaboration and cooperation, teacher buy-in, leadership and organization. Along with a literature review of RTI, I also decided to review the literature on PLC. The results of the literature review help to ensure a sturdy foundation for my RTI implementation plan. Decisions based on assumptions are often ineffective, while decisions based on data and research have an increased probability of success. It is anticipated that the results of the project will create a stepping stone to start the gradual school-wide implementation of RTI practices.

RTI Map

Research Map: Does the Research Supporting the RTI Model have Practical Implications for the School Setting?

A research map explores what research is done on a topic, how the research is conducted, how it has changed over time and what gaps may exist in the body of research. This map will answer questions such as: the broad area of focus, how the research has evolved, the range of views about good or best practices in the field, what is RTI, what the researchers report on the frequency and duration within the tiers, the challenges facing RTI, approaches the researchers have taken to address the questions or issues in the field, the gaps or potential opportunities for new work, the main researchers in the area, and how my own work will make a contribution.

What is the broad area of focus?

The broad area of focus in this research map will be to have a deeper understanding of RTI. Education is inundated regularly by movements or interventions that are touted to be the solution to many of the challenges faced by educators and students. As an administrator, I have witness my school board jump on many bandwagons to ensure we were ahead on educational initiatives that would foster the development of our students. I have witnessed great anticipation (and also reluctance) at the beginning of a program's implementation only for the hype to quickly disappear and the, "I told you it would fail" to engulf the climate in the school.

Passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 in the United States required educators to identify students with "learning disabilities" (LD) on the discrepancy between IQ and academic achievement. This "wait to fail" approach delays the intensive instruction required to improve academic results (Fuchs, Compton, Fuchs, Bryant, & Davis, 2008). The students were required to show a consistent, inability to meet the academic requirements before they were referred to receive extra support. RTI was viewed as an alternative to the over-identification of large numbers of students who were being referred to special education classes in the 1980s and 1990s, increasing the number of students with the Learning Disability (LD) label and increasing special education costs (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan & Young, 2003). RTI was viewed as an alternative to the growing increase in special education referrals. Inadequate teaching rather than a disability could have impacted the low achievement. Teacher's modification of instruction was suggested to better accommodate difficult-to-teach students prior to formal requests for testing and special education placement.

An abundance of research states students' academic success can improve from teaching interventions in small groups setting (i.e., Fuchs et al. 2008; Schwartz, Schmitt, & Lose, 2012). The question is not if extra support can help students because the research does reinforce this theory, but how is this extra support offered within the RTI model?

VanDerHeyden, Witt, and Gilbertson (2007) states:

The research...has focused primarily on the efficacy of the components individually but not on the efficacy of the RTI process as an integrated whole. In theory, if the components were effective, then the overall process would be expected to produce results; however, the question of whether the overall process is effective must also be addressed (p. 226).

Educational approaches may appear to be effective and useful, but they do not always work in practice when you implement strategies within a regular classroom that is not static with limited supports. Control research studies cannot always be reproduced in typical schools and the findings may not be generalized to the majority of the educational settings because additional supports and resources are often incorporated during the experiment and they are withdrawn once the research concludes.

How has the research evolved?

The earlier articles relating to RTI were concerning redefining learning disabilities as inadequate responses to instruction (i.e., Vaughn and Fuchs, 2003). The authors challenge the practice of waiting for the students to fail on numerous occasions before they receive additional support. Vaughn and Fuchs suggests teaching using special interventions is required to improve student learning.

In 2004, Barnett, Daly III, Jones and Lentz published an article dealing with providing accurate empirical appraisals of student's RTI. This data could help organize the required level of intensity program for the individual students who require extra

support or decrease the intensity level after goals have been reached. The data collection helps to tailor programs to meet the individual needs of the child. The focus of this early research was on students already receiving special education services.

There was a significant increase in articles published on the topic of RTI in 2005. Bradley, Danielson, and Doolittle's (2005) article discusses the need to restructure the criteria for special education classes and it suggests that RTI is an alternative to children with LD being placed in special education classes. Vaughn, Linan-Thompson and Hickman (2005) posit the number of students identified as having learning disabilities has increased more than 200% since the category was established in 1977, and researchers claim that many students have been misidentified or unidentified. The increasing focus of the articles include the early identification of LD, prevention of LD, and supporting students with LD. Hagans-Murillo (2005) research examines implementing RTI in preschool to prevent learning difficulties but the author concludes that even with the positive results from the study, current programs do not utilize the findings in the classroom.

Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) once again focus on RTI as an alternative to the expensive special education services and a replacement for the IQ-achievement discrepancy. No tiers or specific structures are identified in the research. By 2008 there is an explosion in the number of journal articles on RTI. There is an introduction of literature concerning English Language Learners (ELL), and the exploration of RTI in middle and secondary schools. Up to this point most of the research has focused on early literacy. The research is focusing more on the application of RTI as a framework for improving academic and behavioural outcomes for all students (Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008). Both Fuchs and Fuchs (2006) and Sansosti and Noltemeyer (2008) identify the

need for more research on how to inform educators about RTI and how to implement the model in the schools.

Schwartz, Schmitt, and Lose (2012) use a randomized experimental design study to determine the relationship between teacher intervention and teacher-student ratios. They reveal that 1:1 instruction resulted in higher academic gains than 1:2, 1:3 or 1:5 teacher-student ratios, therefore a reduction in literacy performance was evident as the group size increased. From 2012 to the present the quantitative and qualitative research has focused on identifying the components of RTI and their effect on the student's achievement.

What is the range of views about good or best practices in the field?

The research (i.e. Schwartz, Schmitt, & Lose, 2012) identifies a number of best practises that should improve student success, however the authors provide cautionary warnings about the inconsistencies in the research and the need for further research to explore the topic.

What is RTI?

RTI is intended to help all the students in a school improve their success. Children who have not received appropriate early reading instruction in the primary grades are more likely to be identified as students with LD's in the middle and upper grades (Denton, 2012). The literature in this research map supports the benefits of RTI; however, there are differences among researchers concerning the structure and components of the tiers. RTI eliminates poor instructional quality as the cause of the lack of student success (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009) and the process appeared to lessen inappropriate referrals.

Tier 1

The majority of the researchers are in-agreement on what constitutes Tier 1. Fuchs, Fuchs, and Vaughn (2014) states Tier 1 refers to the general instruction that all students receive in mainstream classrooms. Classroom routines provide opportunities for instructional differentiation, and accommodations. Highly effective Tier 1 programs are derived from research, not validated by research. Denton (2012) posits effective instruction would include explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, automatic recognition of high frequency irregular words, instruction in making meaning from text, developing vocabulary and background knowledge, making connections to promote reading fluency and comprehension. Tier 1 offers a high-quality education to all the students. Students who require additional interventions move to Tier 2.

Tier 2

Tier 2 is again supposed to offer a high quality of education to the students who need additional support. Fuchs, Fuchs, and Vaughn (2014) states Tier 2 involves small group instruction that relies on empirically validated instructional practices, experimental or quasi-experimental studies that demonstrate that the intervention programs are effective for the targeted students. Therefore, typically involving small group interventions. The instruction follows specific procedures, duration of instruction 10 to 20 weeks of 20- to 45- minute sessions, and a frequency of 3 to 4 times per week. The specially trained educators determine if the student has responded adequately to the interventions. The determination is made whether the students return to Tier 1 without additional Tier 2 supports or if more intensive remediation is required. Al Otaiba and Fuchs (2002) posits students who demonstrate inadequate progress in Tier 2 interventions exhibit severe deficits in phonological processing; processing speed, verbal

working memory, and the students may exhibit challenging behaviours or attention deficit. Smaller groups allow teachers to provide more specialized instruction; students with serious learning problems are likely to benefit from the inherent advantages of small groups.

Denton (2012) posits the supplementary interventions are added to the regular classroom reading instruction, not replacing it. O'Connor et al. (2005) identifies all students who received Tier 2 and approximately 40% of the students who were assigned to Tier 3 interventions performed in the average range on word reading and oral reading fluency in Grade 3. There is no clear agreement on who implements Tier 2 interventions (a) a regular classroom teacher who schedules small-group instruction within their own classroom, (b) reading specialists who provide small-group instruction within the regular classroom or outside the classroom (c) paraprofessionals who receive training from experienced teachers (Denton, 2012). Due to the lack of consistency in the formation of the Tiers, Tier 2 interventions take place within the classroom or outside the classroom (Denton, 2012). Research is required to determine which method is more effective for the students but also from a human resources perspective. If students receive additional interventions in the classroom no additional specialist will be hired, however if the students leave the classroom a specialist will be required to work with the students. Students who require additional support are moved to Tier 3.

Tier 3

There is not a lot of research available for Tier 3 interventions. Tier 3 would offer the most intensive interventions. Data based individualization (DBI) requires one-to-one instruction to meet the needs of the individual students. Programs and resources should only be used when they have an adequate effect size (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn,

2014). The literature is mixed on whether Tier 3 offers special education services or if it is the step before special education services.

Berkeley et al. (2009) posits that many states delay decisions on special education eligibility until the child's responsiveness to Tier 3 interventions has been fully evaluated, making a fourth tier for special education placement.

What do the researchers report on the frequency and duration within the tiers?

Although a number of studies have differing and often vague descriptions of the Tiers, O'Connor, Harty, and Fulmer (2005) states Tier 2 instruction consists of small-group instruction 10-20 minutes, three times a week. Tier 3 interventions consist of five-daily, 30-minute sessions that incorporate group and individual instruction. Vaughn, Linan-Thompson and Hickman (2003) suggests small groups 5 times per week for 35 minutes at 10-week intervals for Tier 1. In the study 10 students exited after 10 weeks of intervention, 14 after 20 weeks, and 10 after 30 weeks with 11 students not meeting exit requirements. In Denton (2012), What Works Clearinghouse recommends that Tier 2 students be provided 3 to 5 times per week for 20 to 40 minutes, in small-groups for at least 20 weeks. Fuchs et al. (2008) reports that first grade students who received 9-week Tier 2 intervention in 45-minute sessions, 4 times per week in groups of 1 to 4 outperform control students on progress monitoring and on standardized reading tests. Denton (2012) identifies the inconsistency in when to start implementing interventions in kindergarten or grade 1.

Berkeley et al. (2009) states children who continue to demonstrate non-responsiveness on assessments for progress are identified for more intensive interventions in small groups of three to five students for 20–40 minutes a day. This is Tier 2— secondary intervention. Children who continue to show non-responsiveness on

Tier 2 intervention are selected for more intensive instruction in smaller groups or individualized for increased time periods 45–60 minutes daily with a specially trained professional. This is Tier 3—tertiary intervention. Some schools allow Tier 3 interventions to be delivered in very small groups; others provide intensive individualized instruction by a specialist.

Fuchs and Fuchs (2009) advocates for a consistent RTI model with three levels— primary (Tier 1), secondary (Tier 2), and tertiary (Tier 3). Other states have four tiers; the fourth tier becomes identification of eligibility for special education (Berkeley et al., 2009). Fuchs et al.'s (2008) longitudinal study reveals a link between assessment and the identification process, enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of early intervention efforts. The results reveal the long-term positive gains when interventions are implementation during the first grade and maintained throughout the grade 2 year.

Vaughn, Linan-Thompson and Hickman (2003) alleges that 10-weeks of daily supplementary reading instruction and assessments was sufficient to allow the students to exit the tier, removing the supplementary instruction. Tier 2 receives an additional 10-weeks up to 30 weeks. Students who never met the criteria were classified as no exit. The significant predictors of students who did not meet exit criteria were the pre-test scores on fluency, passage comprehension, and rapid naming.

Al Otaiba et al. (2014) suggests Tier 2 provides small group and more targeted education twice a week for 30 minutes in groups of four to seven, and Tier 3 is the most intensive interventions and it may include special education services 4 days a week for 45 minutes in groups of one to three students. The statistical analysis of data compares the results from the typical RTI groups (wait to intervene – everyone starts in Tier 1)

with the results from the dynamic RTI groups (immediate intervention and transfer to Tiers 2 or 3) to see if immediate intervention makes a difference in the literacy results for the first grade. Analyses of standard score outcomes from the experiment confirmed that immediately providing Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions to students who qualified in September led to generally stronger reading outcomes by the end of first grade. Waiting 8 to 16 weeks before providing Tier 2 or 3 interventions to the typical Tier students resulted in a delay in interventions and lower academic success. Students in the dynamic RTI group had statistically significantly higher spring reading scores than did students in the typical RTI group. With a moderate effect size of 0.314.

Although the research does not express a consensus in the consistency of frequency and duration of interventions within the Tiers, the research does allow educators to review the available literature and determine the structure of the tiers that would best fit their school environment. Report card periods, class schedules, educators' workloads, availability of specialists on staff, teaching experience and knowledge of the educators can all impact the structure of the Tiers within the RTI model.

What are the challenges facing RTI implementation?

The challenges facing RTI implementation involve the practical implementation of the model and the teacher's perceptions. The concept of offering a high-quality education to all students and extra support to the students who are struggling academically is logical and academically sound. However, the challenges are created during the procedural implementation of the RTI model. The majority of the RTI research focuses on the Tiers and the general structure and benefits of RTI implementation. There is significantly less research on the perspective of teachers concerning RTI. McIntosh, Graves, and Gersten (2007) posits, "the case with any model,

RTI cannot be a panacea. It will only be as good as the knowledge and preparation of the general and special education teachers who implement it” (p. 211). The teachers and specialists are the individuals responsible for the key component of RTI – interventions. In the research map only 27 articles dealt with teachers’ perspectives on RTI, versus over 1000 RTI articles concerning experiments and general information. Fuchs, Fuchs, and Vaughn (2014) identifies decreasing group size, increasing intervention time, and engaging costly, knowledgeable specialists as expensive endeavors, however, not supporting these students is more expensive in the long-term. In times of economic restraint, financial cuts are often only beneficial in the short-term.

Regan, Berkeley, Hughes and Brady’s (2015) mixed method study identifies a number of challenges voiced by educators in the implementation of RTI.

A lack of clarity regarding;

1. roles and responsibilities of staff members within tiers
2. how to collect and analyze data to make decisions
3. finding effective research-based practices to employ with students and how instruction is differentiated at the multi-tiered levels
4. how to implement RTI without extensive support
5. lack of buy-in from administrators and/or teachers
6. the volume of new information
7. inadequate training and time needed for data collection
8. new responsibilities
9. how to provide professional development
10. inadequate preparation to explain RTI to parents
11. lack of time for preparation, planning and collaboration

12. insufficient follow-up to professional development and interventions

Also, due to the complexity of RTI the students may not always receive the maximum benefits. Movement within the Tiers may not be as efficient and as effective as intended. Due to the inconsistency of the implementation of RTI, the benefits for the students vary within schools or across the country. Fuchs, Fuchs and Vaughn (2014) reveals that the belief children are helped by co-teaching, and modifications to the core instructional curriculum is naïve. Because it is unrealistic to think a general teacher and an assistant can support the needs of all the struggling students in a class of 25-35 students. Too few special education teachers have adequate training. Special education teachers do not have enough time to adequately assist every individual student with significant learning problems. Staff members may have a variety of experience and expertise.

According to Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine and Marder most students with learning difficulties receive no substantial modifications to general education curriculum or instruction, returning to Tier 1 without adequate, successful Tier 2 interventions (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2014). There may be an inconsistency in movement and support within and between the tiers. Fuchs, Fuchs and Vaughn (2014) states students linger indefinitely in Tier 2, participating in inadequate intensity instruction even with continued poor performance. This inability to consistently meet the needs of the individual students is troublesome but understandable in a school environment with limited resources and support, alongside budget cuts.

What approaches have the researchers taken to address the questions or issues in the field?

The current research map sites a variety of sources including literature reviews of current research and experimental research in this paper. There have been a number of approaches taken by researchers to address the topic of RTI. The most popular approach was a literature review of current research (Al Otaiba & Fuchs, 2002; Barnett, Daly III, Jones & Lentz, 2004; Bradley, Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008; Danielson & Doolittle, 2005; Denton, 2012; Drame & Xu, Y, 2008; Elizalde-Utnick, 2008; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2006; Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009; Fuchs, Fuchs & Vaughn, 2014; Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009; McKenzie, 2009; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, and Hickman (2003) conducted research with forty-five grade two students providing 10 weeks of supportive reading instruction, the students who did not respond were given an additional 10 weeks of instruction and after reassessment, there was an opportunity for 10 additional weeks of instruction. This study identifies a suggested time frame for intervention implementation.

O'Connor et al. (2005) studied the effects of increasing levels of intervention in reading for a cohort of children from kindergarten to grade 3 to determine if the severity of reading disabilities could be significantly reduced. Vanderheyden, Witt, and Gilbertson (2007) conducted experimental research that examined the effects of the implementation of RTI on the identification and evaluation of children for special education. McIntosh, Graves, and Gersten, (2007) conducted a descriptive study that documented the effects of RTI with ELL in three schools. Fuchs et al. (2008) conducted a longitudinal study in reading with students using "secondary intervention" in a three-tier RTI model. Schwartz, Schmitt, and Lose (2012) used a randomized experimental

design to examine the relationship between teacher-student ratio and literacy learning outcomes with at-risk grade one students. A randomized experiment was conducted by Al Otaiba et al. (2014) comparing typical RTI (where students must all start in Tier 1) to dynamic RTI (students are placed in the appropriate level after assessment). A mixed methods study explored elementary and secondary educators' perceptions of their school district's responsiveness to RTI initiative and it was conducted by Regan et al. (2015). My research reflects a general, yet somewhat limited view due to the extensive research available on the topic, overview of RTI.

Where are the gaps or potential opportunities for new work?

Additional research needs to provide more practical guidance for educators in the implementation of RTI within the typical school setting. During the construct of the research map, the research strongly supports the benefits of RTI, however, research is required to help fill-in the gaps; what are the responsibilities of everyone involved in the RTI model, which RTI method is the most effective, what is the best method to assist students who are resistant to evidence-based interventions, and what accommodations are made for ELL?

The significant gaps I identified were between the theory and the practical classroom implementation of RTI. Educators are the frontline staff providing RTI instruction, however, Regan et al. (2015) identifies the need for training on the “w” questions related to RTI: “Who does it?” “What do they do specifically?”, “Where does it happen?”, “When does it happen and for how long?”, and “How should decisions be made within the process?”. Evidence-based practices require planning and organization. For a system to run smoothly there is a need for everyone to be knowledgeable about his or her roles and have a detailed plan. Failure is eminent when there are no clear

guidelines defining everyone's responsibilities. Adequate training is also required to ensure "expertise". All teachers need to be trained in collaboration, problem-solving, differentiated instruction, how to use specific assessment tools, instructional practices, and progress monitoring (Drame & Xu, 2008).

Although the research supports the RTI model, there is a lack of consistency in empirical-data concerning what RTI methods are the most successful. This empirical-data also needs to be supported by qualitative data to show the practical side of the implementation of the interventions. Fuchs et al. (2008) conducted a study in a small school board that implemented RTI with no additional support. This research may be easier to generalize to a regular class setting than the research conducted by Al Otaiba et al. (2014) who used a controlled study, with trained experts implementing Tiers 2 and 3 RTI. The teachers were also videotaped to insure the fidelity of the teacher's instruction. With limited staff and experts with a school, it would be very challenging to duplicate the dynamic and typical RTI models. The research must reflect the realities in the typical classroom and school environment.

Research is also required to identify how to effectively instruct students with reading difficulties who are resistant to evidence-based remediation. Some researchers created a fourth Tier (Berkeley et al., 2009) while others left the students in Tier 3 indefinitely. There is also a variation in the services offered in Tier 3, this may or may not include special education services (Denton, 2012). Is it better to have special education services in Tier 3 or should Tier 4 be reserved for the non-responding students? What extra supports do they require?

In schools with diverse populations, how do we best service our ELL? Elizalde-Utnick (2008) discusses the increase in ELLs students entering schools and the

overrepresentation of these students in special education programs. Cultural backgrounds and acculturation must be considered. McIntosh et al. (2007) identifies a major cause in reading difficulties, but not the sole cause, is the weaker quality of instruction found in many classrooms in schools serving low-income minority children. Staff development should particularly emphasize instruction, materials, and assessment sensitive to cultural and linguistic diversity (Drame & Xu, 2008). Canada is increasingly becoming a multi-culturally diverse country; how do we best serve ELL students within the RTI model?

Who are the main researchers in the area?

Douglas and Lynn Fuchs are two of the key scholars in RTI. Since the early 2000 to 2016 their research has included the topic of RTI. Douglas Fuchs has helped to make significant contributions to the development of the RTI model. He authored and co-authored more than 300 articles in peer-reviewed journals and 60 chapter books. He has also been identified as one of the top 250 frequently cited researchers. In 2009, Dr. Fuchs was described as one of 14 “revolutionary educators” by Forbes Magazine (RTI Action Network, 2016). Dr. Lynn Fuchs has published more than 200 empirical studies in peer-reviewed journals. Dr. Fuchs has conducted programmatic research on assessment methods to enhance instructional methods to improve reading outcomes for students with learning disabilities (RTI Action Network, 2016). Both Dr. Douglas Fuchs and Dr. Lynn Fuchs have authored or co-authored many articles using a literature review method and have continually added to their existing research. Their research is also quantitative in nature, using controlled experiments to compare the effective of conditions under the umbrella of RTI, focusing on the success outcome of the students.

The research attempts to narrow down the general concept of RTI into components that will have practical implications for classroom instruction.

Where and how do you see your own work making a contribution?

The focus of my research map was to gain a deeper understanding of the educational implications of the RTI model. Before implementing RTI in my school, I wanted to have a deeper understanding of the research so I could start implementing the educational initiative with a detailed, comprehensive implementation plan supported by research-based methods. Too many educational initiatives (i.e. Whole Language) have been implemented in schools and along with the exurbanite cost and time factors, there has been a very nominal effect size on improving teaching and learning. Before I invest the time and money into implementing RTI in my school, I wanted to have a clear understanding of the suggested methods of what was required before moving theory into practice. The current research supports the implementation of small group, research-based interventions as having a positive effect on student outcomes; however, the lack of consistency on the structure of RTI causes challenges in the practical implementation of the model. For example, dynamic RTI requires immediate placement in Tiers 1, 2 or 3 but typical RTI places everyone in Tier 1. Tier 1 students are reassessed after a specific time period before they can move to Tier 2. Dynamic RTI shows the strongest effects on student outcomes but do the schools have the resources to fast track the assessments and placements of the students? The research must be viewed from the eye of the educator determining the practical implications for their school environment.

This research map helps to summarise the existing research to create a clearer picture for educators on how to implementation specific components of RTI within a school. Tier 1, Tier 2 and Tier 3 would require creating specific criteria to determine

who qualifies for each tier, the frequency and duration of the interventions, and the staffs' responsibilities. After conducting the literature review I now realize there needs to be flexibility in the structure of any RTI model. Class schedules, staffing, school calendars, percentage of ELL students, and the employment of specialists can all impact the organization of the RTI model within a school. My contribution is in the creation of a summary of relevant studies concerning RTI that should help to guide educators' discussions on how to organize RTI within their individual schools. The literature review identifies the challenges faced by educators and a staff discussion has the potential to identify compromises and solutions. Instead of RTI becoming another bandwagon initiative, educators would benefit from trying to generate a model that fits the individual needs of the students in their school system. I have also identified a number of gaps in the research and suggestions for further studies, including research for the students who are non-responsive to the interventions, ELL, and more empirical data on the effective components of RTI. In a time of economic restraint, extra supports and materials are limited. Schools would be well advised to provide cost-effective, collaborative opportunities for educators to identify how they will enhance student learning under the response to intervention umbrella.

Professional Learning Communities Research

After reviewing the research literature on RTI, it was abundantly evident that a significant component of the success of a RTI program is based on the collaboration of educators within a structured model. PLC is another educational initiative that has been promoted in many school districts. The research examines the emerging theoretical underpinnings of, and growing evidence base about on, PLC. The focus was on the review of books and scholarly sources, mainly from peer-reviewed journals, on this

topic. I will attempt to grasp the concept of PLC, the role of leadership, the importance of collaboration, the relevance of data collection, and the challenges that impede the growth of PLC. To understand the complexity of PLC, the participants must have a holistic vision of the concept.

The primary goal of all schools is teaching and learning. Chen (2012) defines PLC as collaborative learning among educators, meeting regularly, to solve problems related to teaching and learning, as a means of improving student achievement. Many schools, school districts and departments of education claim to have implemented PLC to enrich teaching and learning. Sheppard, Brown, and Dibbon (2009) posits that the term PLC is a buzzword of the day without any consideration given to its theoretical underpinnings or growing evidence base. The creation of an effective PLC requires knowledge, dedication, and an organization agenda.

According to Hall and Hord (as cited in Sheppard et al., 2009), PLC are “a largescale innovation that require[s] major changes in the role of teachers, principals, and schools [that] take[s] five to eight years to implement” (p. 8). Change takes time and planning. Schools are dynamic organizations that require meaningful understanding and planning before educational reforms can be successfully implemented. While Hall and Hord claims it takes five to eight years to implement PLC, Sheppard states that many organizations are claiming to have already implemented PLC; are these organizations truly functioning as PLC? Horton and Martin (2013) states the implementation of PLC takes time, resources and vision; it cannot be rushed, “nor can the process be done in a vacuum” (p. 68). Schools are not static environments, they are dynamic and complex, there must be a thorough understanding of what defines PLC, the requirements and commitments that it entails, and the implications for the education system.

What is a PLC?

Before we can claim to have PLC in our schools, we must understand the definition. Dufour, Dufour and Eaker (2012) defines PLC as “an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve...the key to improving learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators” (p. 93). PLC emphasize collaboration among educators with the goal of actively improving student’s achievement and promoting teacher’s learning. PLC are different from other professional development because learning and professional learning is embedded in a social context – the notion of a community (Jones, Gardner, Robertson & Robert, 2013). PLC require educational stakeholders to actively collaborate in a community to enrich the learning opportunities for all students. A key concept of PLC is that teachers are also learning from their colleagues: The traditional, bureaucratic framework of teachers working in isolation and disconnected from their colleagues is replaced by grouping teachers by grade and subject areas. Dufour et al. (2012) identifies the big idea of PLC as accepting “learning as the fundamental purpose of our school and therefore are willing to examine all practices in light of their impact on learning” (p. 98).

Leadership

Chen (2012) states that principals have the greatest influence on the creation and maintenance of PLC. Principals can lead the team to success, in an atmosphere of generosity and acceptance, by creating a feeling of caring and motivation within the learning community and by setting a personal example as a respectful listener (Chen, 2012). A principal, as educational leader in the school, can help to motivate staff members through sincere investment in educational reform. Nevertheless, teachers are

not followers in the PLC model; they are active participants and leaders, sharing the leadership role with the principal, creating a distributed leadership. PLC need to shift from a traditional top-down structure to a community that builds teacher leadership skills through collaboration, developing leaders among staff members (Horton & Martin, 2013).

As Horton and Martin (2013) explains, the PLC philosophy of leadership is more democratic: voices are heard and the process is valued. Principals should set high expectations for themselves and teachers, confront resistant teachers, and develop a positive relationship with staff. Principals must be able to model effective collaboration (Horton & Martin, 2013). It is essential for a principal to set high expectations for themselves and the team, in an environment where people feel comfortable expressing their opinions and suggestions. A climate of acceptance is required where people feel their voices are being heard and appreciated. DuBrin (2010) defines leadership “as the ability to inspire confidence and support among people who are needed to achieve organizational goals” (p. 2). The leader needs to be viewed as a partner in the process, not a dictator or authoritarian. It is easier to enhance teaching and learning when everyone is working together as a trusting team, rather than as individuals in isolation.

Credibility is the foundation of leadership (Kouze & Posner, 2011), and a leader must foster trust among the stakeholders to develop collective efficacy to foster distributed leadership (Horton & Martin, 2013). A lack of trust among members of a collaborative team will result in barriers and ineffective collaboration.

Collaboration

Dufour et al. (2012) clarifies the need to cultivate a collaborative culture by developing high-performance teams, building shared knowledge to engage collective

inquiry, and learn together. Collaboration results in capacity building, learning from others, and meaningful decision making for education stakeholders. Effective collaboration requires authentic input from participants that produce desired results. Hoy and Miskel (2013) suggests that fostering group ownership of problems and ideas enhance value and motivation, and nurturing shared decision-making develops teacher expertise, interest and trust.

The structure of the PLC must be well established to facilitate collaboration. The success of PLC will depend on the capacity of the organization to facilitate collaboration among individual learners who learn from each other and accept distributed leadership roles -teachers are viewed as partners (Sheppard et al., 2009). When teachers are receptive to the opinions of others, and participate in a distributed leadership role, they work together in high functioning teams that find solutions to problems. Collaboration requires active engagement from members. A principal cannot run PLC alone; staff members are needed to allow the community to function. A group of collaborators can utilize constructive criticism and analysis to solve problems. Schechter and Qadach (2012) identifies the transformation of individual learning into organizational learning, with teams being the building blocks of an organization. Team cooperation helps to direct individual learning into organizational learning, sharing ideas in a positive climate. The support from individuals working together as a team helps to stabilize an organization.

PLC are intended to positively impact student achievement and learning. The collaborative teams track student progress. Horton and Martin (2013) states that when teachers accept collective responsibility for student learning, the teachers and administrators are forced to identify each individual child, and make necessary

adjustments as they progress through the system. A shift in responsibility occurs when the children's success is viewed as a responsibility of the collaborative team, not solely the responsibility of the individual teacher. The group members are empowered to make positive changes. Song (2013) states that empowerment increases an educator's ability to share their practices, distribute accountability, and increase the respect, acceptance and recognition of their colleagues. Self-empowerment also allows teachers to take on difficult tasks, share with others, and express professional views.

Data Management

To improve teaching and learning, PLC focus on data management as a means to identify areas of improvement for individual children, and areas where teachers need to adjust their teaching to enhance student learning. Formal assessments also provide evidence to teachers of what the students have learned. Looking at the results allows teachers to change their instruction to facilitate student learning. Horton and Martin (2013) posits, data collection is powerful because it allows us to focus on teaching and learning, and encourages the participants to search for new ways and methods to teach – thinking outside the box. In short group collaboration facilitates creative thinking.

Analyzing data allows us to see improvements made in teaching and learning and areas where improvements need to be made. Dufour et al. (2012) states that effectiveness is based on results rather than intentions - information is used to promote continuous improvements. As teachers, we often assume we know the content areas that are challenging for our students, but without appropriate tests and assessments we are guessing; data provides a more accurate snapshot of our classrooms. Instead of placing responsibility on the students, the onus is on the teachers to review their teaching

methods. Jones et al. (2013) states, in the PLC model, teachers are expected to give serious attention to how children learn and the difficulty of grasping critical concepts.

Horton and Martin (2013) clarifies that, “transformation of schools into PLC had a positive effect on student learning through the teacher’s use of common assessments data to modify instruction” (p. 68). Collaboratively examining data results allow the teachers to identify the individual students in their classroom who need extra help with concepts. The sharing of data also allows teachers to compare class results.

Discrepancies can result in teachers collaboratively sharing the strategies they utilize in the classroom to improve student learning, enhancing the teaching of all the teachers on the collaborative team. Horton and Martin (2013) explains how, highly collaborative teams create efficacy and establish emphasis on data analyses to improve instruction.

Challenges

My literature review revealed a number of challenges that need to be addressed before PLC can be effective or established. A number of inhibitors resulting from the school structure are: a shortage of teachers teaching the same subject area (McConnell, Parker, Eberhardt, Koehler & Lundeberg, 2013), lack of meeting times and time in the schedules (McConnell et al., 2013; Horton & Martin, 2013), lack of common interests or goals among teachers (McConnell et al., 2013), busy schedules (Wells & Feun, 2013), outside directives from the Ministry of Education and from within the community (Chen, 2012), lack of support for collaboration (Sheppard et al., 2009), a need for instruction on how to analyze student achievement, support in creating assessment tools (Wells & Feun, 2013), loss of local leadership capacity when a school board is removed from the region (Sheppard et al., 2009), and teacher’s expressed concern when no one seemed to know what he or she was doing – turning confusion into anger (Wells &

Feun, 2013). Furthermore, teachers at small schools and specific subject specialists (i.e., music or physical education teachers) may be the only teachers working in their subject area. If collaborative teams cannot be created in the school, it is possible to develop collaborative teams from other schools via Video Conferencing Network or SKYPE. It is imperative that collaboration time is built into every teacher's schedule, and it is very important that the objectives of PLC are well understood by all members to alleviate frustration and facilitate collaboration. The community must learn how to effectively deal with outside forces so they have a minimal negative impact on the PLC's climate. Professional development on how to collaborate, create data and analyze data can be offered to educational stakeholders.

A number of personal barriers identified in the literature review resulted from: the reluctance of teachers to collaborate (Horton & Martin, 2013), increased contact with teachers they would prefer to avoid (Wells & Feun, 2013), losing one's identity, fear of exposure, invasion of privacy and fear of criticism, lack of group openness and group atmosphere (Chen, 2012), and different levels of benefits for different teachers (Jones et al., 2013). In our traditional school system teachers are used to working in isolation; educators are now requiring our teachers to work in groups to share resources and knowledge. PLC's collaborative teams are formed by the grade taught or the subject area, they are not created on the compatibility of the group members. Additional challenges are created when we ask our teachers to share the data from their individual classrooms to discuss the results. Teachers may view comments as criticism of their teaching practices. Jones et al.'s (2013) results defines a lack of group focus, administrators taking over meeting with paperwork, too many voices for effective sharing, being sidetracked, and lack of good ideas were also counter-productive. Group

dynamics was identified as the single most important factor for success of PLC by the participants in the study by Jones et al. (2013). The principal would have to take the responsibility of dealing with challenging staff members in an uncooperative environment. Teachers would be well advised to maintain a professional relationship when working with all the members in a group.

Challenges should be discussed at collaborative meetings in an attempt to create workable solutions. PLC cannot be viewed as another tedious task that is added to the teachers' existing heavy workload. Teachers may be willing to commit their time and resources if they view the PLC as having a direct benefit for their students and themselves professionally. Wells and Feun (2013) posits that teachers buy-in was enhanced when they witnessed the payoffs of positive changes in student achievement, championing the continuation and support of PLC.

Conclusion

PLC are a continual collaboration of educators who target the learning of students. Collaboration should extend to all the educational stakeholders. Leadership roles have changed from top-down to distributed, empowering teachers to accept leadership roles. Collaboration develops critical thinking to create solutions to problems, benefiting teaching and learning. Data management provides evidence of what the student has learned. A review of the data allows us to focus our attention on the individual needs of our students. Challenges to the effectiveness and development of PLC can include a lack of time and interest, collaborative teams can help find solutions to problems. When teachers observe the direct benefits of a PLC in their classroom, and on a professional level, they are more willing to invest their time and energy.

A highly credible and committed principal must facilitate and share leadership with his or her staff, to improving leadership capacity. With the support of a knowledgeable principal in a culture of collaboration with high expectations, and adequate time and resources, a PLC may be implemented. Benefits for students in a PLC result from the regular collaboration of educational stakeholders in distributed leadership roles, reviewing data to improve the teaching and learning of the students, and the ability of flexible teams to overcome challenges. PLC are a complex innovation that requires a holistic understanding, commitment, and support from all educational stakeholders.

LiveBinder

Introduction

This LiveBinder will be a living, regularly updated toolkit. The binder is easy to access, available online, colour coded according to the topic, contains a multitude of information and videos, and all the documents can be printed or copied with the purpose of supporting educators and students. The binder contains; specific schoolboard student support forms, Quebec Department of Education documents, staff job descriptions and evaluations, schoolboard endorsed educational initiatives, early literacy skills/assessments, information concerning RTI and PLC, information on exceptional learners, and the phase 1 RTI implementation plan for our school. Due to the individual needs of students and teachers, the educators may choose the applicable documents or resources they require. The selection of materials and resources are based on educational initiatives supported by our schoolboard. Although a small number of educators may participate in schoolboard endorsed professional development, the binder allows all educators to have access to pertinent documents. The binder will be shared with the resource teachers and principals in our schoolboard, however, it is not intended to be

shared with educators outside of our schoolboard. The long-term goal is to accumulate helpful resources from all the schools within our schoolboard – building capacity and improving teaching and learning.

Website Link

http://www.livebinders.com/play/play_shared_binder/2166685?play_view=play&present=true

Access Key: 5291

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Response to Intervention Implementation Plan

Introduction

Our school board has provided RTI professional development for the principals and resource teachers in our schools. The two main presenters were Mary Howard, who provided professional development in our school district, and the RTI at Work presenters at the Solution Tree conference in Quebec City, Quebec. The research (i.e., Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn, 2014) strongly supports the significant effect size of RTI in helping to improve teaching and learning. The management at our schoolboard has started to verbalize their desire for RTI to be implemented in all of our schools. I have witnessed many educational initiatives fail over my teaching career and due to my background as an educational leader with a special education degree, RTI is an educational initiative that I want to successfully implement in my school. My PowerPoint, *Phase 1 – Don't 'Wait to Fail': Effective Instruction for all students*, is intended to turn the theory of RTI into practice within my school.

Teaching does not occur in a vacuum, there are many factors that impact the successful implementation of an educational initiative. 'Waiting to fail' is no longer acceptable because failure may be a result of inadequate instruction rather than a

reflection of the student's ability level. My PowerPoint outlines the importance of PLC in fostering collaboration, the acceptance of collective responsibility and accountability, the need to have a growth mindset that all students can achieve success, the importance of creating a positive school culture, creating time for authentic collaboration, using assessments and feedback to guide instruction, and using research-based strategies in the classrooms. Included in the PowerPoint is an outline for the implementation of RTI in my school. Schools are not a static environment and the schedule allows flexibility for changes based on the needs of the students and staff. Time management is a significant challenge faced by all education initiatives, therefore time for collaboration is built into the teachers' schedules. The PowerPoint is intended to be a starting point for the implementation of RTI, not a rigid unwavering document. Sharing the document with fellow educators is intended to highlight the beginning of our journey.

Phase 1 PowerPoint



The complete downloadable and printable PowerPoint is available in the LiveBinder.

http://www.livebinders.com/play/play_shared_binder/2166685?play_view=play&present=true

Access Key: 5291

Locate the Red Tab: *PowerPoint - Implementing Response to Intervention in Vermont School* and click on the tab to view the complete 117-page PowerPoint.

Conclusion

I believe I have accomplished all three of my goals in completing this project. During the 16-week semester the review of literature regarding RTI and PLC allowed me to create a solid foundation for phase 1 of my RTI Implementation Plan for the 2017-2018 school year. After witnessing many educational initiatives fail, I wanted to ensure I grasped the information existing in the research and created a well-organized, research-based plan in which I would assume a leadership role. In creating the LiveBinder it also helped to guide my RTI Implementation Plan. My intent was to follow the educational philosophies shared by the administrators at our schoolboard. I chose to create our plan using information from Mary Howard's RTI model and the RTI at Work Solution Tree model. Both models are research-based and our schoolboard has already provided professional development pertaining to the two models to the principals and resource teachers. After the professional development sessions, all the educators agreed that RTI has the potential to improve teaching and learning but many educators voiced their concerns regarding how to start the process. I feel sharing my journey may be viewed as a springboard to start phase 1 in other schools within our schoolboard. At the end of the 2017-2018 school year I plan on creating a document concerning the successes and challenges we faced during the implementation process.

The project also required me to carefully outline a Phase 1 RTI Implementation Plan for the 2017-2018 school year. I anticipate that the structured plan will increase our chances of successfully implementing RTI. The plan may need to be adjusted during the school year due to the needs of the students or the staff and that addresses the non-static nature of the school environments.

The LiveBinder is easily accessible, very organized and can be improved upon with contributions from other schools. It could be a very useful resource for current and new employees to familiarize themselves with educational initiative that are used in our schools. The LiveBinder may also create improvements in the communication between schools and the sharing of resources. Our schoolboard covers a very large geographic area and we have limited interaction with staff members from other schools, therefore connecting online may help to reduce this gap. We have access to a multitude of resources and overcoming obstacles and creating a well-organized plan is the first step towards making improvements in our schools.

One challenge that I can potentially foresee in sharing the LiveBinder is it may not be exploited. Similar to many educational initiatives that are filed away, the binder may be underutilized. Perhaps the resource teachers should help to further develop the binder before it is shared with colleagues. When people collaborate, they are more likely to assume ownership, therefore there is an increased probability they will utilize what they have created. Improving teaching and learning is the primary focus of every school and by bridging the gap between theory and practice - success should ensue.

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Appendix

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