

Educators' perceptions of Response To Intervention implementation and impact on student learning

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ABSTRACT

The Response to Intervention Framework has created a change in the paradigm of the educational system where educators must pursue other avenues before embarking on testing and labeling a child. The Response to Intervention initiative has provided educators with a research-based framework that can be implemented at all levels of schooling. There has been much research done about the success of the research-based model itself, but there is research lacking in the area of educators' perceptions of the process.

This qualitative study asked elementary educators who are involved in the day-to-day implementation of the Response to Intervention program to share their thoughts, experiences, and perceptions regarding the program and its implementation in their school. Results of the data from this study revealed that while the Response to Intervention framework is a research-based program; the participants in this study shared that modifications need to be made in order to maximize the positive impact of the framework. Results from this naturalistic inquiry are significant because of the contribution the study makes to the research literature that could potentially modify the structure of the implementation of Response to Intervention.

Keywords: Response to Intervention, implementation, intervention program

INTRODUCTION

Response to Intervention Defined

Response to Intervention has been defined in different ways by many educators and scholars since its inception; however, the federal law known as IDEA or the Individual With Disabilities ACT has referred to it as a tiered approach to instruction (Lawrence, 2007). Those students who are not making adequate progress undergo a series of intense instructional modifications implemented by a qualified person, while at the same time being monitored on a continuous basis. Lawrence (2007) noted three discerning steps that are incorporated into a Response to Intervention framework: 1) instruction is provided in the regular classroom where screening tests are given to struggling students, 2) regular education teachers or other qualified personnel provide instruction in a small group setting, 3) more frequent instruction occurs and specialists conduct ongoing comprehensive evaluations of the student's progress (p.2). One important aspect of the framework has been emphasized by Fuchs, Fuchs, & Vaughn (2014), that being, "Response to Intervention was designed to improve academic performance of struggling students with and without disabilities and to provide practitioners with a more valid means of disability identification" (p.13).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This qualitative study explored educators' perceptions of Response to Intervention implementation and its impact on student learning. The study focused on three Hispanic females from one south Texas high needs school district that have varying degrees of experience with Response to Intervention.

The study is in response to the call in the literature by Mellard, Frey, and Woods (2012) who have beckoned for rigorous investigations of the framework. The main objective of the study is to bring the perceptions and beliefs of educators to the forefront so that a dialogue about the both strengths and struggles educators encounter with the framework may begin.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research:

1. What perceptions do educators have of the implementation of Response to Intervention in their school?
2. Do educators perceive Response to Intervention as being successful in student achievement?
3. How do educator perceptions of Response to Intervention impact its implementation on their campuses?

METHODOLOGY

Introduction & Research Design

The focus of this study is a qualitative naturalistic inquiry regarding educators' perceptions of Response to Intervention implementation and success in schools. A qualitative

approach was taken following the led by Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen (1993) who stated, “the intricacy of the context that is revealed by naturalistic inquiry permits application to interpersonal settings that are impossible with most studies that follow prevailing research strategies (p.17). Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that using the human as the instrument in a naturalistic inquiry is the only choice. Furthermore, they noted several characteristics that qualify the human as the instrument of choice because of its unique qualities such as responsiveness and adaptability.

The selection of the participants was done through purposeful sampling. Patton (1990) stated, "The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (p.169). The participants were selected because of their overall knowledge and years of experience in the educational system. Erlandson et al. (1993), suggested that, “Purposive and directed sampling through human instrumentation increases range of data exposed and maximizes the researcher’s ability to identify emerging themes that take adequate account of contextual conditions and cultural norms” (p. 82).

The site selection was due largely in part to conversations that took place between the researcher and several educators teaching in the area. The researcher saw a need to investigate the perceptions educators have to the overall Response to Intervention framework. Dialogue, interviews, and conversation with professionals having knowledge of the subject being studied is one way to select a site for study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, site selection was chosen by the researcher on the basis of having previous conversations with educators at this school. It was also found that due to being familiar with the site selection, entry into the site was readily accessible to the researcher.

The process of collecting information was lengthy, but necessary in order to obtain the most accurate information possible. The sources used for this naturalistic research were interviews, observations, and documentation. The interview itself was a semi-structured interview, which is a well-organized plan that contains essential questions and issues the interviewer wishes to further study (Erlandson et al., 1993). The interviewees were contacted via phone and email asking them if they would like to participate in a research project. They were given brief information on the topic and a date and time were set up for the interviews. At the onset of each interview small talk was initiated and the interviewees were given a brief synopsis of the research to put them at ease. They were asked to read and sign the IRB consent form and ask any questions before beginning the interview. Documentation of the interview was done through an audio recording. The audio recording was then transcribed into excel and grouped into themes.

Data Analysis

Erlandson et al. (1993) state that data analysis in a qualitative research is a progression that is ongoing. Therefore, the data analysis of this research began when the researcher examined questions for suitability to pose the interviewers. Once the researcher selected the questions, the researcher attempted to sequence them in a manner that would allow for conversation to flow. After every interview the researcher reflected on the interview itself by looking at the notes taken and listening to the audio recording. This use of reflective journaling is noted to improve trustworthiness and credibility of the study (Erlandson, et al., 1993). The next

step was to transcribe the interview. While the researcher transcribed the interview she was once again contemplating the interview and deriving themes from the conversation. At the end of the transcribing session the researcher printed out the interviews and looked at themes in the interview and noted the theme in the margins. Once all three interviews were transcribed they were looked at once again to look for categories through out the three interviews. Index cards with descriptive titles were used to categorize themes that emerged within the study. The researcher followed the method of Erlandson et al. (1993) of spreading out the cards and placing the descriptive sentences into the most suitable category. This process was repeated after every interview and then again with the inclusion of all three interviews.

Trustworthiness and Credibility of the Study

Trustworthiness is a very important factor in qualitative research. For this qualitative research trustworthiness was established using the following techniques: prolonged engagement, triangulation, thick description, purposeful sampling, member checking, and audit trails. Prolonged engagement was easy to incorporate because the researcher is familiar with the respondents and the schools they work at due to the fact that the researcher works in the same school district. Prolonged engagement was also achieved because the researcher is also an educator in the district and has worked alongside the respondents at different periods through out their careers. Triangulation was achieved by having conversations with other educators in the same district that were not interviewed for the research. Also, the three sources of data were used by interviewing three respondents who were all from different elementary school, but from the same school district.

Credibility was established through member checking. Since member checking is the most crucial technique to establish credibility in a qualitative research it was imperative that it be done (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checks were established after the interview was transcribed. The transcribed interview was sent to the interviewee via email so that they might be able correct errors, add to their responses, or simply verify that the information is correct and accurate. In the email it was requested that the interviewee review the transcription and call or email back a response. The researcher also phoned the respondents to let them know they would be receiving an email and to please take appropriate actions.

Thick description and purposeful sampling were used and go hand in hand as Lincoln & Guba (1985) stated that even though thick description has yet to be clearly defined purposeful sampling supports it because it provides for a wide array of information for inclusion in the thick description. Finally, an audit trail was established through the attainment of interview documents, analysis products, and data analysis reports. In conclusion, the steps that took place in this qualitative research were done in order to, “give order to some set of phenomena so that they will make sense to the researcher and so the researcher can communicate that sense to others” (Erlandson et al. 1993, p. 73).

RESULTS

Introduction

The outcome data provided by the respondents revealed that educators believe Response to Intervention is a positive step towards intervening in student achievement and learning, but

also that there is still much to be done in order to streamline the process. Overall, educators see Response to Intervention as a viable source for student achievement, but there appears to be considerable frustration with certain aspects of it as one informant stated, “Let me just teach the child. I don’t want to have to write about teaching the child, I want to have time to teach the child.”

A key reason this study was done was in order to determine what educators think of Response to Intervention and what adjustments need to be made in order to create a more streamlined process that will be beneficial to students and educators.

Participants in the Study

This naturalistic research study included three educators all whom were Hispanic females with varying degrees of experience. The demographic information provided below is simply to convey an awareness of the type of educators interviewed.

The respondents were all educators in the elementary school setting who taught in the same school district, however were teachers in different schools. All three teachers are teachers in the upper elementary level.

Description of Participants

Renee

Renee was the first participant interviewed. She is a Hispanic female in her fifties. She is a fifth grade teacher with thirteen years of experience. She is certified in grades first through sixth and is currently a gifted and talented teacher and is responsible for the gifted and talented pull out program. In her thirteen years of teaching she has been a teacher in fourth grade for nine years and a teacher in fifth grade for four years. She is the sponsor of the Art Club and considers herself a facilitator who guides students towards their own learning.

Amy

Amy was the second participant interviewed. She is a Hispanic female in her fifties. She is fifth grade teacher with over 20 years of teaching experience. She is certified as a generalist in grades kinder to eighth grade, as a bilingual teacher in grades kindergarten to twelfth grade, and as a special education teacher in grades kindergarten to twelfth grade. Through out her career she has taught first grade, fourth grade, fifth grade, and middle school as a regular education teacher, a bilingual teacher, and a gifted and talented teacher. She believes that educators are there to help students become well-rounded citizens and to guide them and show them what is out there in the world for them.

Elaine

Elaine was my third and final participant interviewed. She is a Hispanic female in her thirties. She has been in education for over thirteen years. She is certified to teach kindergarten to fourth grade and bilingual kindergarten to twelfth grade. She was a para-professional in the kindergarten setting for two years, a kindergarten teacher for one year, and a third grade teacher for ten years. She has taught students in the regular education classroom, the bilingual

classroom, and the gifted and talented classroom. She is a co-sponsor of the Ecology Club and UIL coach. She believes in looking at the individual student and working on their weaknesses while at the same time building up their strengths.

Findings

Data from the respondents has been categorized into themes achieved through several rounds of coding. The themes have been organized by identifying perceptions educators have about Response to Intervention. The several rounds of coding led to sub-themes within the themes found in the study. The data obtained by the participants revealed four overarching themes: 1. The RTI process is too cumbersome in terms of paperwork and implementation; 2. With RTI comes a lot of responsibility on the teacher; 3. RTI can be a good intervention program; and, 4. Teachers need more training in the Response to Intervention framework. Several underlying themes also emerged, but these were always overpowered by the desire of the participants to remain positive. The underlying themes detected were a sense of frustration, a feeling of being overwhelmed, and the desire to remain positive at all costs.

The RTI Process

An emerging theme through all of the participants was the fact that Response to Intervention process itself was overwhelming. Response to Intervention required too much paperwork and it was often confusing and inconsistent. As a result of this it is believed that it discourages some educators from filling out the paperwork and avoiding the Response to Intervention process thus depriving students from achieving success. Elaine stated,

Sometimes teachers want to avoid all the paperwork so they, give that child more help in the classroom just so they can get a passing score. Sometimes that child needs more than that and I think it is doing an injustice to the child and if the paperwork was a little friendlier and shorter, teachers would be more willing to do more the intervention [process].

Furthermore, the process itself was too time consuming. Amy stated, “ I don’t like it (RTI). It’s too time consuming. We take up a lot of time with it.” She stated that it is difficult to be successful when you have too many intervention groups. Her principal requires her to have a certain number of groups and she is not able to teach the rest of her class.

Obstacle to Success

All three participants stated that they believed the paperwork for Response to Intervention was an obstacle to having a successful Response to Intervention program. The obstacles were either due to the program being fairly new to some and thus having to learn the paperwork or the paperwork itself changing. Renee stated that initially she thought it was a great burden because she was not sure what was required of her. She also stated,

There really wasn’t a format and our administration would sometimes flip flop on this is how you should be doing it, not try it this way, so initially there was a lot of confusion, but as time has progressed we have gotten a little better.

In this case the participant reveals that the program is improving, but adjustments still need to be made in order to make improvements to the program. She reveals that administration

needs to come up with a process that streamlines the paperwork so that obstacles to success are removed.

Elaine revealed, “ I think that if you are able to finish the paperwork and have the child get tested...it is one of the biggest achievements because from there they are able to determine whether they are or do qualify for special services.” In this statement Elaine reveals that success can only be achieved after all the paperwork is completed, which states that the focus may be on the paperwork and not the child. Thus exposing that the length and amount of paperwork overshadow the real need and that is to have the child experience success.

Confusing and Inconsistent

Another sub-theme revealed is that the process and paperwork can often be inconsistent and confusing to the teachers. Elaine stated, “There are too many steps to get to where you want to get to.” She also stated that the paperwork often asks for information they do not have or do not know where to obtain it. This confusion only adds the refusal to begin the Response to Intervention process. The inconsistency of the paperwork by those in charge also adds to the desire to begin the process let alone the paperwork it entails.

Responsibility

Responsibility in the process and implementation of Response to Intervention was a key theme that emerged in the study. The participants felt that the Response to Intervention framework put even more responsibility on the teacher than was necessary. Renee stated that when she has students in intervention there is a lot of responsibility that goes along with it. She stated, “ The greater number of folders a teacher has you have a greater responsibility. That means you have to be very careful with your classroom management because you want your groups to be small and be able to work one on one with that group.” This means careful planning is required not only with students that are in Response to Intervention, but also with those that are not.

For other educators the responsibility of the RTI process and implementation equates to more stress. Amy stated that the morale of the school is low because there are too many expectations placed on the teachers. “Too many things are expected from the teacher and not enough time in the day and so it kind of stresses... a little more stress is put on everyone that wasn't there before because of RTI.” Although Response to Intervention should help lift the burden of a teacher and not be an added stress it appears educators do not view the framework in the beneficial manner it was intended to provide them.

Marrs & Little (2014) conducted a naturalistic study where they examined the perceptions of school psychologists and found that staff was resistant to implementation, but stated that it might be due in part to the lack of understanding of the procedures. This might well be the same difficulty the interviewees are experiencing on their campuses and therefore, it is worthwhile to look at the implementation and the program as whole in the individual schools.

Good Intervention Program

It was overwhelmingly agreed upon that the Response to Intervention framework is a good intervention program, but adjustments need to be made in order to have complete success and student achievement.

Track Progress

Tracking student progress is one reason teachers believe a good Response to Intervention framework is needed. Renee stated, “ RTI impacts learning and achievement because we are able to track progress and we even track it vertically through out the grade levels and you can show percentages gained or lost from one grade to another.” This helps to ensure students do not continuously lag behind and helps to learn more about the student in need. Of students in need Elaine stated, “ You are more aware of their needs because you have worked with them a little bit more, a little bit longer, you have struggled with them, along with them.” The participants felt that due to RTI they were more in tune to the needs of the students and that helped them provide the assistance that was needed.

Sanger, Friedli, Brunken, Snow, and Ritzman (2012, p, 99) stated,

The third tier (of RTI) of intensive, individualized intervention provides specialized instruction for individuals who are still struggling and have not shown improvements. During this level, intervention within the tiers continues to be provided, allowing assessment and documented progress to be a continual, ongoing process.

This means that part of the success of the program is tracking the students in need and tailoring those needs to have them succeed.

Proper Implementation is Essential

The participants vehemently believed that if implemented properly the Response to Intervention framework would be successful. Amy stated that proper implementation of the program required several requirements to take effect. She believes proper implementation will work, “If it is done properly and you do have the time and you have a small group or maybe someone other than the teacher to take those kids and work on it.” In other words, proper implementation would necessitate a school wide examination of the framework and make changes from a school wide stand point.

Another example of proper implementation stems from administration supporting and sustaining the RTI program. Elaine stated, “ I think it has had a positive impact because the principal encourages it so much with the lower grade levels.” She believes that administration has the power to implement it at the initial level and thus should be an advocate for the model. To this end, Sanger, et al (2012) states that research itself shows that team members need to be aware of the challenges that occur with Response to Intervention (p.99). Therefore, success of the implementation is in part due to how those at the higher grade levels are supporting the framework.

Robins & Antrim (2012) state that, “A well-implemented program includes evaluation for fidelity and sustainability. Such a program requires multiple years to develop and is based on teachers working together to build consensus” (p.5). This statement should be considered by any educational system that executes the Response to Intervention framework. It is imperative that

the program be carried out in the manner it was designed, but many times educators do not have the proper training to do so. Next follows the final theme that emerged in the qualitative study of the need for professional development in the area of Response to Intervention.

Professional Development

The final overarching theme that emerged in this naturalistic research study is the need for professional development. The participants voiced the desire to be properly trained in Response to Intervention. They expressed the desire to attend trainings on classroom management, small group training, training on how to fill out paperwork, and the understanding of the Response to Intervention model itself.

Renee felt that one of the biggest obstacles to achieving success in Response to Intervention was classroom management, while conducting small groups. She stated, “It is difficult to make sure everyone is on task and engaged in learning when you are working one on one and you’re working off to the side with a small group.”

Amy voiced similar concerns when she stated, “What do I do with the other kids while I am doing intervention?” She also stated that she would like help with training so she can manage her small groups better, while at the same time keeping the other students on task.

Spear-Swerling and Cheeseman (2012), conducted a study where they gleaned what knowledge teachers had for implementing Response to Intervention models and it was found that they were unfamiliar with the research based instructional approaches and beneficial interventions used. While they were familiar with the basic tiers of Response to Intervention, they were found lacking in the actual implementation of the program. This study clearly shows that teachers at all educational levels need ongoing professional training on Response to Intervention practices and techniques.

CONCLUSION

The themes described above all revealed that although Response to Intervention is indeed a viable source of assisting struggling students, changes need to be made so that teachers and students are successful in the program. The changes teachers would like to see is a reduction in the amount of paperwork required of them as well as a reduction in the stress they feel it places on them. The final recommendation was for more professional development in the area. These are all practical requests that can be implemented in order to move ahead with the framework.

Tyre, Feyeborn, Beisse, and McCready (2012) stated, “regardless of the potential of RTI to meet the needs of all students, attempts to shift to an RTI model may well be ineffective if the systemic features of the school are not considered” (p.103). This speaks to the fact that although it may be a good program it will not be successful if the teachers’ concerns are not heard prior to and during implementation.

All of the challenges the participants voiced in their interviews can be resolved, but the change must begin at the administrative level. Sansoti, Noltemeyer, and Goss, (2010) believe that,

It appears that particular research attention is needed to elucidate the processes and supports needed at administrative levels in order for RTI to be successful. Although RTI differs from previous attempts at educational reform, success hinges on the support it receives from school leaders. (p. 286)

This is an impactful statement and one that must be heard. Educators and administrators must join together to develop a plan for the implementation of a successful RTI program.

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