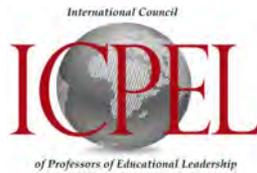


Perceptions of RTI Implementations Among Administrators in Rural Elementary Texas Public Schools

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



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The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the perceptions of RTI implementation among administrators in rural Texas elementary schools. Qualitative research was needed to provide administrators with a comprehensive understanding of the demands of RTI implementation (Benjamin, 2011). The researcher conducted a qualitative study in which administrators from rural elementary public schools in Texas were selected because of their knowledge and experience in the educational system. Participants participated in semi-structured interviews that focused on the implementation of RTI in their school. Research questions focused on student success related to RTI and implementation of RTI in rural schools. A review of the literature examined the existing literature on the historical perspective, definition, and components of RTI, as well as the diverse needs of students and how special education relates to RTI. This study fills this gap through the use of hermeneutic phenomenology, which organized and structured the perceptions of experienced educators. The findings resulted in six themes that were value, leadership, training, processes, student focus, and concerns including funding, resources, teacher turnover, time and training.

Keywords: *Intervention, Special Education, Hermeneutic Phenomenology, Academic Needs, Behavioral Needs*

Response to intervention (RTI) provides a framework for prevention and intervention (McDaniel, Albritton, & Roach, 2013). The process used by schools that employ RTI helps teachers determine if a student reacts to evidence-based instruction in an expected manner (Stecker, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2008). The primary benefit of this process is the provision of service to students who have unmet academic or behavioral needs (Glover & DiPerna, 2007). RTI is intended for use as a preventive method for an intervention prior to testing for special education that was developed after the reauthorization of Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 2004. The use of RTI to determine whether students make appropriate progress and how to intervene, if an intervention is deemed necessary, was permitted by IDEA (Nai-Cheng, 2014). Since learning disability (LD) was identified as a category for students in 1977, the number of students classified as LD has increased more than 200% (Vaughn, Linan-Thompson, & Hickman, 2003). Timely and precise identification of students with disabilities is critical; students must receive services that can help them to be successful as quickly as possible (Bradley, Danielson, & Doolittle, 2005).

Even with the length of time RTI has been available, schools are still struggling to implement programs. Rural schools, in particular, struggle with RTI implementation (Walker, 2006). Barrio and Combes (2015) carried out a study on the level of concern among teachers with the implementation of RTI. The findings of the study suggested that teachers do not feel adequately prepared to implement RTIs in their own schools. The lack of preparation of teachers is not the only issue teachers in rural areas face. There are no state or federal funds allocated specifically for RTI implementation at the campus or district level (Rudd, Richardson, & Christian, 2015). With a lack of funding as well as personnel training, RTI implementation in rural areas can become nearly impossible. Samson (2009) found that a number of resources including books, trainings, websites, and articles that are focused on RTI have become available, but little guidance on how to proceed with implementation of an RTI framework existed. This study fills this gap through the use of hermeneutic phenomenology, which can organize and structure the perceptions of experienced educators. Data were collected from a sample group through an interview protocol (Creswell, 2009).

Statement of the Problem

RTI is one of the most common initiatives currently implemented to help all U.S. students have equitable access to general education (Stuart, Rinaldi, & Higgins-Averill, 2011).

Rural schools, in particular, struggle with RTI implementation (Walker, 2006). With a lack of funding as well as personnel training, RTI implementation in rural areas can become nearly impossible.

Although government and state mandates strongly encourage schools to implement RTI programs, teachers and staff are still reluctant to embrace the approach as an educational change because it is difficult to implement due to the barriers people place between themselves and change (Avant & Lindsey, 2015). Some adversaries of RTI claim that these programs delay special education referrals, which is a denial of the free and appropriate public education to students with disabilities (Carney & Stiefel, 2008), which is another barrier to implementation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the researcher was to explore the perceptions of RTI implementation among administrators in rural Texas elementary schools. RTI programs typically focus on instructional outcomes and an attempt to close the achievement gap (Fletcher & Vaughn, 2009), which applies

to both suburban and more rural schools. Texas public schools are identified by Texas Education Agency (TEA) and placed into one of nine categories: independent town, non-metropolitan, fast growing, major urban, major suburban, other central city, other central city suburban, non-metropolitan: stable, rural, and charter school districts. TEA (2013) identifies rural schools as “either: (a) an enrollment of between 300 and the median district enrollment for the state and an enrollment growth rate over the past five years of less than 20 percent; or (b) an enrollment of less than 300 students” (p. 3). RTI implementation is challenging to many administrators, but even more challenging to administrators who are in rural Texas elementary public schools because they do not always have as many resources as larger districts, or those who are closer to the state department of education, education service centers, or nearby colleges (Stecker et al., 2008).

Literature Review

The RTI framework has led to a shift in the educational system, in which schools must pursue other ideas to assist students who struggle with coursework before they are tested and/or identified as special education students (Cowan & Maxwell, 2015). Since the early days of special education, teachers referred struggling students to special education assessment because they did not feel prepared to meet their instructional needs (Richards et al., 2007). Carney and Stiefel (2008) reported, “RTI has come to schools through federal legislation but it has been left to educators and researchers to interpret and investigate the best means of operationalizing this intent to ensure that student difficulties do not stem from instructional deficiencies” (p. 61). Public school administrators are responsible for the implementation of RTI.

An effective RTI model includes quality instruction, progress monitoring, intervention, supports, and assessments. A three-tier model in which students move through different prevention and intervention phases based on their individual needs shapes effective RTIs (McDaniel et al., 2013). If a student has moved through all stages of this model and is still not successful, they will then be assessed for special education services. A strong RTI program will be based on a structured, data-driven system that is flexible and regularly monitors the progress of students (Bradley et al., 2005). McDaniel et al. (2013) found that few RTI articles have addressed audiences such as general educators and educational leaders. McDaniel et al. (2013) found that most research on RTI focused on progress monitoring and targeted interventions. RTI implementation is highly complex, and does not follow a linear path (Avant & Lindsey, 2015).

Like many education initiatives, a gap still exists between research and practice with RTI (Hill, King, Lemons & Partanen, 2012). Quantitative research previously carried out on RTI does not adequately fill the gap; there was a need for qualitative research as well (Benjamin, 2011). Qualitative research was necessary to provide educators with real life feedback from fellow educators who have experience with RTI models.

While many schools are adopting the RTI framework, it is important to point out that the number of professional development opportunities are limited in explaining RTI and its implementation (Samson, 2009). Rural Texas elementary schools struggle even more than other schools, due to limited resources in their area such as school finances, facilities, attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers, curriculum, policy mandates, community relations, and declining enrollment (Lamkin, 2006).

The main question that still needed to be answered was how administrators perceived and implemented response to intervention in rural Texas public elementary schools. This study filled this gap through the use of hermeneutic phenomenology, which can organize and structure the

perceptions of experienced administrators. The researcher designed this study to explore the perception of administrators on the RTI framework.

Rural schools are often lacking in resources such as funding, staffing, and professional development (Stecker et al., 2008). The sample group selected for this study was selected due to the lack of existing research focused on rural Texas public elementary schools. Many school administrators struggle to find ways to increase student achievement; through more knowledge and resources to help implement RTI, their school districts can be improved.

Methodology

A phenomenological approach was uniquely suited to meet the needs of the researcher and provided much needed information from administrators who have experience with implementation of RTI (Creswell, 2007). Hermeneutic phenomenology studies make use of interviews. A social constructivist framework carefully to explore the perceptions of RTI implementation among administrators in rural Texas public schools. The phenomenological approach was uniquely suited to meet the needs of the researcher and provided much needed information from administrators who have experience with implementation of RTI (Creswell, 2007). Research questions, design, and procedure were carefully considered as the interviews and data collection process began to take shape.

In this study the researcher followed a social constructivist framework, as it utilizes a worldview where the researcher seeks to understand the world in which they work and live. In this type of study, the researcher looked for the complexity of views as opposed to the narrow meanings assigned to categories. The goal of the researcher was to rely on the participants' views of the topic or situation. The researcher did not start with a theory; instead, she generated a theory or pattern of meaning through the study. Research questions were left broad so participants could create the meaning of the situation. Once participants provided input, the researcher interpreted findings shaped by participants' experiences and backgrounds. The interpretation component of the researcher is one reason qualitative research is sometimes characterized as interpretive research (Creswell, 2007).

Research Questions

In a social constructivist approach, research questions are left broad so participants can create and define the meaning of the situation (Creswell, 2007). Responsive interviewing in a semi-structured protocol guided the researcher; this means the main questions comprised the scaffolding of the interview. The researcher followed main questions with probing questions to help manage the conversation and fill in any missing pieces. To effectively determine perceptions of RTI implementation among administrators in rural Texas public schools, the following responsive main semi-structured interview questions were used (Rubin & Rubin, 2012):

1. How does your school discern if RTI promotes student success?
2. How do the administrators' perceptions of RTI impact its implementation at your rural Texas public school?
3. What are administrators' greatest concerns regarding the implementation of RTI in a rural Texas public school?

Participants

Based on her knowledge and experience in the educational system, the researcher purposely-selected participants in this study. Only administrators from rural Texas elementary schools in the Texas Region 7 or 10 ESC designated areas were eligible for selection and participation in the study. The sample group was selected based on the recommendations of the Region 7 and Region 10 education service centers (ESC7 and ESC10) and the criteria set out in the study as prescribed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This ensured that the participant criteria set forth in the study were met for each participant. An initial pool of 3 administrators were identified and solicited via e-mail. Two additional participants were solicited until saturation allowed for trustworthiness through assuring that rich descriptions were collected (Morse, 2015).

All participants had at least 3 years' experience as a campus administrator, and at least 3 or more years at the campus the participants represent. Two of the participants were females and the other 3 were males. Three of the principals had near 3 years' experience as a principal and the other 2 had over 10 years of experience at his or her campus as a principal. All 5 principals were Caucasian. The input of participants was critical when looking at the implementation of RTI in rural Texas public elementary schools.

Treatment of Data

Data for this study were collected from rural public-school administrators. Participants were purposely selected by the researcher based on their knowledge and experience in the educational system. Only administrators from rural Texas elementary schools were eligible for selection and participation in the study. All participants had at least 3 years experiences as a campus administrator, and at least 3 or more years at the campus they represent. The researcher used an interview protocol as specified by Creswell (2009). The input of participants was critical when looking at the implementation of RTI in rural Texas public elementary schools.

Participants in this study shared his or her accounts of their perceptions of RTI implementation in rural Texas elementary public schools. The researcher used member checking as a strategy for trustworthiness. Sorting responses in the coding process by theme permitted the researcher to track occurrences in which participants shared similar information. The researcher constantly compared the words and phrases from coding to determine the number of themes sufficient in the presentation of findings. Each theme that appeared in this study carefully aligned with previous research. Following coding, the researcher progressed to analysis of the data. Six themes emerged following the collection, coding and analysis of the data including value, leadership, training, processes, student focused and concerns which included funding, resources, teacher turnover, time and training.

Findings, Conclusions, and Implications

The researcher explored the perceptions of RTI implementation among administrators in rural Texas elementary schools. The themes that emerged from the study were elements that the participants thought were needed in order to have gotten where they are today with RTI at his or her rural Texas elementary public school. The data collected in this study helped to answer the 3 research questions that guided this study about how his or her school discerns if RTI promotes student success, how the administrators' perceptions of RTI impact its implementation at his or her rural Texas

elementary public school and what the administrators' were most concerned with regarding the implementation of RTI at his or her rural Texas elementary public school.

The findings from this study were supported by the literature related to the perceptions of RTI implementation among administrators. Participants in this study shared his or her accounts of their perceptions of RTI implementation in rural Texas elementary public schools. The researcher used member checking as a strategy for trustworthiness. Sorting responses in the coding process by theme permitted the researcher to track occurrences in which participants shared similar information. The researcher constantly compared the words and phrases from coding to determine the number of themes sufficient in the presentation of findings. Each theme that appeared in this study carefully aligned with previous research. Following coding, the researcher progressed to analysis of the data. Six themes emerged following the collection, coding and analysis of the data. All participants expressed a need to continue learning and improving his or her RTI processes and systems at their schools. In addition to sharing his or her concerns, participants also identified practices that helped their school be successful with implementing RTI. The researcher wanted to find out why and how the participants in this study made RTI implementation so successful, even though they faced challenges associated with rural public schools in Texas. Campus and district administrators should be aware of the themes identified in this study as they try to revise or create RTI processes, as these themes have proven important to the participants who made up this qualitative study.

This study revealed that school or district leaders must value RTI in order for it to be successful. Leadership from the administrators is crucial when it comes to RTI so there will be buy-in from the staff and also so it will be sustainable. Training must occur at the beginning of the year, and include onsite coaching for teachers and staff implementing RTI. Strong processes must be in place for how RTI works and what type of data and documentation will be monitored throughout the year. The school or district must be student focused, because that is why RTI exists. Lastly, school and district administrators must identify and face the concerns that his or her school may have with the implementation of RTI. For rural schools to be successful with RTI administrators need to know where the school is and how to can address the concerns. The researcher determined that the success of RTI at participants' schools was due to the heavy involvement of administrators in RTI implementation and management.

Educational Importance of the Study

The RTI framework has led to a shift in the educational system, in which schools must pursue other ideas to assist students who struggle with coursework before they are tested and/or identified as special education students (Cowan & Maxwell, 2015). Public school administrators are responsible for the implementation of RTI. While many schools are adopting the RTI framework, it is important to point out that the number of professional development opportunities are limited in explaining RTI, and its implementation is limited because few empirical studies included a full RTI approach (Samson, 2009). Many schools do not implement RTI programs because they do not understand the rationale for changing, and they also feel that implementation is too slow a process. Rural Texas elementary schools struggle even more than other schools, due to limited resources in their area such as school finances, facilities, attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers, curriculum, policy mandates, community relations, and declining enrollment (Lamkin, 2006). Stability is desirable, and many schools would prefer to maintain their status quo with student placement than take the time and energy to change (Avant & Lindsey, 2015).

Presentation of Findings

In this study, the researcher explored the perceptions of RTI implementation among administrators in rural Texas elementary schools. The themes that emerged from the study were elements that the participants thought were needed in order to have gotten where they are today with RTI at his or her rural Texas elementary public school. The findings are the result of semi-structured interviews with the participants who had at least 3 years as an administrator, and participants were at a rural elementary public school in ESC 7 or 10 boundaries. The data collected in this study helped to answer the 3 research questions that guided this study about how his or her school discerns if RTI promotes student success, how the administrators' perceptions of RTI impact its implementation at his or her rural Texas elementary public school and what the administrators were most concerned with regarding the implementation of RTI at his or her rural Texas elementary public school.

All participants expressed a need to continue learning and improving his or her RTI processes and systems at their schools. In addition to sharing his or her concerns, participants also identified practices that helped their school be successful with implementing RTI. The findings of this study provide practical qualitative elements that expand on the existing research.

Principals willing to participate in the study provided information that led to the identification of 6 themes:

1. Value;
2. Leadership;
3. Training;
4. Processes;
5. Student focus; and
6. Concerns including funding, resources, teacher turnover, time, and training

Conclusions

The conclusions from this qualitative study filled gaps in the understanding of phenomena through the accounts experienced and shared by the campus administrators who successfully implement RTI at his or her rural elementary Texas public school. Earlier studies on RTI were generally concentrated around quantitative research. There was a demand for qualitative research as well. Qualitative research was essential to deliver educators with real life feedback from fellow educators who have experience with RTI models (Benjamin, 2011). The discoveries from this study deliver information on the lived experiences of identified by the ESC 7 and 10 as successful rural elementary campus administrators, which provided clarity and understanding for researchers, practitioners, education service centers (ESC) and collegiate educator preparation programs and state legislative bodies. Additionally, those who seek to advance to the role of a rural elementary Texas public school campus administrator can use results of this study.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

The researcher designed this qualitative research study to explore the perceptions of RTI implementation among administrators in rural Texas elementary schools. Qualitative research was needed to provide administrators with a comprehensive understanding of the demands of RTI

implementation (Benjamin, 2011). In the limited studies of rural school districts, at-risk conditions have been identified; this has led to these schools being overlooked (Walker, 2006). Hermeneutic phenomenology is considered interpretive or descriptive; by using a hermeneutic design, the researcher was able to gain insight from practitioners lived experiences with the implementation of RTI in rural Texas public schools (Van Manen, 2016). The researcher focused more on the area of describing versus interpreting the perceptions of administrators in regards to implementing RTI.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of the researcher was to explore the perceptions of RTI implementation among administrators in rural Texas elementary schools. These facets were studied in a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenology method and provided valuable information to fill the gap in the existing literature. The need for more qualitative research on the subject of RTI is still needed. Fletcher and Vaughn (2009) indicated, “more research focusing on how schools successfully implement (and struggle to implement) RTI models will be needed” (p. 5), which this study addressed. The researcher was focused on the implementation of RTI overall, not on any particular subject; reading tended to be the main area participants discussed specifically. Future researchers could interview campus administrators with a focus on RTI mathematics in elementary school.

English Language Learners are a growing population in the state of Texas. Many schools are searching for ways to improve the way schools serve this population, and are finding that it is becoming a large group served through the RTI process (Vaughn et al., 2003). Future researchers could design a qualitative study and interview educators who are serving this population successfully utilizing the RTI framework. Sanosti et al (2010) note that there is still a need for more research. At the secondary school level, there is need of implementing interventions. At the elementary level it is common for schools to have Title I teachers, interventionists, and even RTI or intervention time built into the schedule.

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