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Response to Intervention: A Study of Intervention Programs in Rural Secondary Schools

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by

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A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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This Dissertation has been approved as partial fulfillment

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Dr. Sherry DeVere, Dissertation Chair — Date 12/14/17

Dr. Nate Moore, Committee Member — Date 12/14/17

Dr. Gary Greene, Committee Member — Date 12/14/17

Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree.

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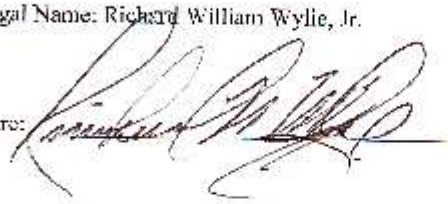
Signature:  Date: 14 Dec 2017

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Abstract

During the late 20th and early 21st centuries, a trend developed for schools to meet the needs of struggling and at-risk learners through the implementation of multi-tiered response to intervention models (Apple, 2014). Response to intervention (RtI) is one of those frameworks and has been extensively researched from the perspective of those working in urban elementary schools (Burns & Gibbons, 2013). This research project was designed to allow for better understanding of the rural secondary perspective of RtI through investigation of the perceptions of administrators, counselors, and educators who have implemented RtI frameworks. This qualitative examination resulted in a narrative gathered through interviews with teachers, counselors, and administrators working in rural secondary schools of southwest Missouri about their experiences with academic intervention strategies and response to intervention. Data were gathered during the fall and spring of 2017. The purpose of this study was to add to the limited body of research about the implementation, operationalization, and improvement of RtI programs in rural secondary schools. Respondents identified difficulties and obstacles and illustrated how the implementation of RtI has affected their roles. Both similarities and differences were discovered between rural secondary-level staff and their urban elementary-level colleagues. Respondents explained how solutions addressed problems with their programs. The researcher noted how this process created one-of-a-kind multi-tiered intervention programs. Lastly, suggestions for additional research were offered.

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Chapter One: Introduction

For decades, critics of the U.S. educational system have asserted the entire structure is obsolete, certain students are profoundly underserved, and an extensive overhaul is necessary (Iorio & Yeager, 2011). Critics have stressed the U.S. educational system fails because there is a deficiency in systems to identify and assist struggling learners (Buffum & Mattos, 2014). Over the last three decades, this movement has coalesced into the largest reformation campaign for educational improvement ever seen in the history of U.S. public education (Apple, 2014).

The educational reformation of U.S. public schools, like other large-scale social movements, has both been affected by and influenced by the country's jurisprudence (Rader, 2015). In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration put forth their blueprint for improving the nation's schools in the form of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (Halstead, 2014). Included within the ESEA's configuration was the requirement Congress reauthorize the legislation every five years (Klein, 2010).

Taking advantage of the five-year renewal of the ESEA, George W. Bush's administration lobbied Congress, and in 2002 the ESEA became the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (Mulcahy, Mulcahy, & Mulcahy, 2014). The rationale for this evolution centered on the belief that despite legislatively mandated involvement, there was an ongoing failure of schools to close gaps in achievement scores (Leiding, 2012). According to Urso (2011), NCLB provided the mandate, by establishing accountability measures, for schools to adopt and implement intervention strategies designed to mediate failing learners and identify students with learning disabilities.

In 2004, the adoption of the Individuals with Disabilities Education and Improvement Act (IDEIA) sustained the mandate for evidence-based intervention strategies (Hall & Mahoney, 2015). The intention of this legislation was to further support struggling learners (Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyannis, 2006). Specifically, the 2004 IDEIA was intended to facilitate improved academic performance as determined by increased scores on standardized assessments (Björn, Aro, Koponen, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2016). This legislative progression emphasized the need to correct deficiencies in the educational system through a tiered approach for identifying struggling students, directing improvement using an interventionist approach, and focusing efforts to recognize those needing special education (Salvia, Ysseldyke, & Witmer, 2012).

Compelling public schools to implement multi-tiered support systems for academically underperforming students led to the advancement of one program in particular, the three-tiered framework called response to intervention (RtI) (Burns, Jimerson, VanDerHeyden, & Deno, 2016). Riley-Tillman and Burns (2011) pointed out while there was no shortage of multi-tiered support programs, the ones receiving the most attention and support were initially used to identify students in need of special education services. The RtI model developed beyond qualifying students for special education services and became an instrument for schools to systematically identify and address academic deficiencies for all students (Castro-Villarreal, Rodriguez, & Moore, 2014). This development prompted this examination of how RtI works in rural secondary schools.

Contemporary RtI, according to Samuels (2008), is “an educational framework which promises to raise achievement through modification of lesson plans based on

frequent ‘progress monitoring’ and is one of the most-discussed education topics today” (p. 28). Volpe and Fabiano (2013) described RtI as a framework wherein educators collect individual academic performance data, work through an entire diagnostic process for each struggling student, apply tiered interventions, progress monitor, and in cases where improvement is not realized, refer a student directly to special education services. From its origins at the elementary level, support for RtI in secondary schools has developed to the point of being mandated for implementation in 14 states and strongly recommended in many others (Zirkel, 2013). Burns and Gibbons (2013) considered RtI as a program originating in the elementary special education setting while also resulting in “positive outcomes for students” at the secondary level (p. 13).

The RtI model, like many other systematic processes within organizations, provides the opportunity to illustrate correlations between program efficacy, or lack thereof, and the ability of the administration and staff in rural secondary schools to organize, support, and implement the changes necessary to start a new practice (Culot, 2011). Exploring the challenge of introducing a pedagogic system not originally designed for secondary-level schools, nor comprehensively researched for application in rural environments, was the intent of this project (Guy, Fields, & Edwards, 2016). The dynamics of interest were change and implementation of RtI in rural secondary-level schools.

Research on RtI consists mostly of studies focusing on implementation at the elementary level (King, Lemons, & Hill, 2012). The common RtI templates accessible to educators are designed for urban schools, suggesting a deficiency of professional development resources for educators and administrators in rural secondary schools

(Ahram, Stembridge, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011). This study focused on the scholarly research related to RtI, its effect on professional development of teachers and administrators working at the secondary level in rural schools, and the perspectives of those directly involved in realizing effectual RtI programs in rural secondary schools.

Background of the Study

In the latter half of the 20th and into the first decade of the 21st centuries, multi-tiered support systems, like RtI, became accepted practices in the education profession (Mitchiner, McCart, Kozleski, Sweeney, & Sailor, 2014). Acts of federal and state jurisprudence, including the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) of 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2001 (commonly known as No Child Left Behind), the revised EHA of 2001, and the 2004 revision to 1990's IDEA (now known as IDEIA) both directly and indirectly institutionalized multi-tiered support systems within the U.S. educational system (Hall & Mahoney, 2015). According to Lee (2012), while contemporary legislation put forth numerous programs designed to further the educational reformation movement, the IDEIA coalesced support around the implementation of a system founded upon multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) for struggling students. Like the widely promoted RtI system, MTSS have influenced educational pedagogy in the modern era (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011). Specifically, RtI replaced the use of the ability-achievement discrepancy model for the identification of learning disabilities and then expanded into a program used to recognize and address academically struggling students (Colorado Department of Education, 2008).

Within the educational reform movement, those championing RtI established a unified campaign to reshape the U.S. educational system by putting forth models of reform rooted in standardization, tiered interventions, and progress monitoring (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011). Reformers stuck with two primary suppositions (McNeil, 2013). The first, that each student, regardless of how disparate his or her individual characteristics (namely intellectual development, motivation, attitudes, learning styles, socio-economic status, race, and parental support), can be precisely labeled, allowing for the application of universal solutions to academic problems (McNeil, 2013). Secondly, that there is little variation among the nation's schools; they all exist in the same homogeneous reality wherein variables such as enrollment size, funding, socio-economic status, teacher training, and variations in local control are inconsequential (Canter, Klotz, & Cowan, 2008). By holding precepts constant, it appears implementation of RtI has become unrelated across the nation; there are few examples of how to systematically implement RtI, and educators remain tasked with figuring it out (Bilton, 2011).

Response to intervention is a multi-tiered educational strategy intended to aid in the early identification and support of struggling learners, who because of learning and/or behavioral needs, have been unsuccessful in conventional academic settings (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011). The RtI model is characterized by a multi-tiered framework and is intended to (a) triage struggling learners; (b) catalog their academic maladies through the use of specific assessment data; (c) apply targeted interventions designed to improve performance or to transition students into special education programs; and (d) transform students into successful learners over the duration of their academic careers (Morrison, Russell, Dyer, Metcalf, & Rahschulte, 2014).

As the variables involved are identified within tiers, then RtI, as an academic system, can become challenging to implement (Fisher & Frey, 2013). Many educators and administrators tasked with implementation, particularly those who are predisposed to resist change, who are not well-trained, or who feel overburdened, fail at the task (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014). This, coupled with a lack of guidance in secondary-level implementation and the disparity between rural and urban realities, implies having a successful RtI program in a rural secondary school can be problematic (King et al., 2012). According to Kauffman, Ward, and Badar (2015), the cumulative popularity of RtI has led to it being one of the most-investigated educational reform topics in U.S. history. Despite this considerable recognition, there have been few formal examinations into how school administrators and teachers are to actually implement RtI within their particular schools. Subsequently, U.S. public schools have taken a one-size-does-not-fit-all approach toward RtI (Sparks, 2016).

As an overview, a social reform movement ushered in an age of public school accountability, encouraged MTSS programs in schools, and influenced paradigms to accept MTSS programs as best practice for improving public education in the United States (Carter, 2013). In the last three decades, there has been extensive research conducted into operationalizing and managing RtI; however, upon more scrutiny, educational leaders and educators discovered interesting absences exist within this scholarship (Davidoff, 2012). In 2002, under NCLB, schools were in some states mandated, while in others strongly encouraged, to implement research-based intervention programs (Urso, 2011). Then in 2004, the IDEIA emphasized the use of evidence-based intervention strategies for the implementation of MTSS programs such as RtI

(Greenwood et al., 2011). Neither act of legislation provided schools with anything more than the basic mandate, while both neglected to include specifics on how to accomplish the task within rural secondary schools (Maier et al., 2016).

There was consequently a surge in research on MTSS and particularly RtI (Burns et al., 2016). The academic examinations of RtI focused predominantly on urban school districts with sizable enrollments while confining scrutiny to grades pre-K to six, the grade levels in which RtI has traditionally been employed for identifying students requiring special education services (Eklund, 2011). Simply put, vast investigative data exist about all facets of RtI within the context of educational support in urban school districts (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012).

There has been minimal research conducted to identify what specific challenges exist when implementing and operationalizing RtI in rural schools (King et al., 2012). Additionally, almost no research exists on implementing and operationalizing RtI in rural secondary schools (Burns & Gibbons, 2013). Therefore, rural secondary schools, while experiencing the same direct and indirect mandates to implement RtI-like programs, have the additional challenge of a lack of research-based frameworks applicable to their reality with which to support their efforts (Cartwright, 2016). This unavailability of research, along with fewer examples of authenticated success, suggest rural secondary-level schools are devising their own RtI-type frameworks to best meet their particular requirements (Preston, Jakubiec, & Kooymans, 2013).

This project was designed to uncover the challenges faced by secondary-level educators and administrators in rural schools as they implement and operationalize RtI. The linear examination was concentrated on factors affecting RtI's implementation in

rural secondary schools. Perceptions, attitudes, and insights of administrators and teachers tasked with the implementation of RtI were elicited. This investigation allowed the investigator to understand administrator and teacher perceptions of RtI, specific program characteristics of RtI implementation, and maintenance of such programs in rural secondary schools. The inquiry included an investigation of necessary resources for RtI implementation and maintenance and the influence of teacher training (Bissell, 2012).

Existing research on MTSS programs suggests variables like perceptions, attitudes, and insights are discounted in favor of standardized models of tiered intervention designed for large urban schools (Urso, 2011). Schools may be much more heterogeneous than reformers and previous researchers have recognized them to be, particularly when introducing research involving secondary-level schools in rural districts. This study was designed to determine if obligating rural secondary schools to standardized intervention programs designed for urban elementary schools has led to success, ineffectiveness, or adaptation of the RtI framework (Callender, 2014). Such an investigation has the potential of providing insight into specific difficulties rural secondary schools face when implementing an RtI template designed for urban environments. This research could offer further understanding of how rural schools are carrying out the directive to implement and manage multi-tiered support for struggling learners. Such an examination could become a guide for educational leaders and educators in rural secondary-level schools for the implementation and operationalization of RtI.

Theoretical Framework

Research for this inquiry into the implementation and operationalization of RtI in rural secondary-level schools began by considering the rule of law, specifically the reauthorization of the IDEA in 2004 (Hollenbeck, 2007). The interpretation of the reauthorization put forth a model granting educators access to federal funds typically allocated for special education services and allowed those funds to be used to support intervention models (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). There is a general consensus as to the composition of RtI programs, along with a great deal of scholarly literature supporting intervention methods like RtI for addressing the problem of academically at-risk elementary-age students (Skelding-Dills, 2013). Because of little scholarly consistency about implementation and operationalization of RtI in secondary schools, much less in rural schools, there is opportunity to supplement the narrative and aid in the effort to mediate the issue of academic failure.

While considering the jurisprudence, the framework for this study was based upon the Stages of Concern outlined in the Concerns-Based Adoption Model of Change (CBAM) (Anderson, 1997). The CBAM is a theory of change originally put forth by Hall and Hord in 1987 (Hall, 2013). Christou, Eliophotou-Menon, and Philippou (2004) further described the CBAM as a theory of change to describe, explain, and predict individuals' reactions when exposed to something new. Over its four decades-long existence, the CBAM has been used to develop and understand reform movements and to manage change in social constructs (Hall, 2013).

The CBAM has advanced the idea that programs leading to change must take into account the beliefs and perceptions of those affected, otherwise success is unlikely

(Marzano, Zaffron, Zraik, Robbins, & Yoon, 1995). The CBAM was selected as an appropriate framework for this study because it focuses on perceptions, attitudes, thoughts, and beliefs which occur when change is carried out (Hall, 2013). There is a similarity between Hall and Hord's (2006) initial research, focused on teachers and college staff and a psychological explanation to understand an educator's management of change, and the proposed population and sample group for this study, namely teachers and administrators and their management of change when implementing and managing RtI.

Statement of the Problem

Brown-Chidsey and Steege (2011) suggested intervention strategies account for the differences in features between elementary and secondary schools. Yet secondary schools are implementing RtI, and the scholarly research indicates educators and administrators are using what is available to them, namely elementary frameworks (Burns & Gibbons, 2013). The literature does provide some information on the need for fidelity, and along with promotion of training, describes mutually agreed-upon elements of RtI said to be necessary if intervention is to work at the secondary level (Koselak, 2013). This study was designed to examine rural secondary schools and their application of RtI.

Because commonplace models of RtI tend to be based upon urban templates and tend to be preferential toward elementary grade-level application, administrators and teachers in rural secondary schools have been tasked with realizing effective MTSS without suitable research-based support (Johnson & Mellard, 2014). There are a limited number of published studies concerning the implementation and operationalization of MTSS within rural school districts (Johnson & Mellard, 2014). The intent of this study

was to fill the current void in academic literature for rural secondary school administrators and educators concerned with the implementation and operationalization of RtI by illustrating the following:

- The difficulties rural secondary school administrators and teachers face;
- The obstacles secondary school administrators and teachers report experiencing while implementing RtI;
- How RtI implementation has affected the roles of rural secondary teachers and principals; and
- The composition of RtI programs in rural secondary schools.

It is hoped further understanding of these four categories will facilitate those working in rural secondary schools to manage change and enhance student achievement.

Purpose of the Study

According to Spear-Swerling (2008), implementation of RtI introduces second-order change. Second-order change within the context of education can be illustrated as an extreme procedural adjustment for teachers in their efforts to identify and serve underperforming or at-risk students (Benjamin, 2011). The IDEIA mandates this second-order change for general education teachers, because it prescribes the implementation of RtI, which requires the application of a pyramid of interventions for failing students and redefines the roles of teachers, counselors, and administrators (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012).

In an effort to add to the meager body of research about RtI in rural secondary schools, this qualitative study was designed to examine the ways RtI is being implemented and operationalized. The intent was to identify obstacles and how RtI implementation has affected the roles of rural secondary teachers, counselors, and

principals. This study was also designed to facilitate the implementation of tiered support systems for academic intervention by providing the insights of those who implement and manage RtI programs in the context of rural secondary schools.

The first phase of the study was an investigation into the understandings of educators, counselors, and administrators about RtI's commonly accepted components. The intent was to establish if there is agreement between practice and the scholarly record. Rural secondary principals and teachers identified the various challenges encountered when tasked with implementing and operationalizing RtI with fidelity. Staff also identified the characteristics of RtI in rural secondary schools (Spiegel, 2009).

During this investigation, consideration was given to include suggestions of rural secondary administrators for their colleagues (Spiegel, 2009). Ultimately, this study was intended to correct the scholarly deficiency by gaining insight into what secondary teachers, counselors, and administrators know about RtI, how they implement RtI in their schools, and how RtI implementation influences instruction for struggling learners. Of specific interest was insight into staff level of understanding of RtI, their skills, their perceptions, and the professional development requirements needed to implement RtI with fidelity in rural secondary-level school districts.

Research questions. The following research questions guided the investigation:

1. What characteristics of response to intervention do rural secondary-school principals, counselors, and teachers identify as they implement and manage academic intervention?
2. What do rural secondary-school principals, counselors, and teachers report as obstacles of implementing response to intervention?

3. What advantages and disadvantages do rural secondary-school principals, counselors, and teachers report as they implement and manage academic intervention?

4. How has response to intervention implementation affected the roles of rural secondary-school principals, counselors, and teachers?

5. What are the components of response to intervention programs in rural secondary schools?

Definitions of Key Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following terms were defined:

Curriculum-based measurement. Curriculum-based measurement (CBM) is used to assess student academic competence at one point in time and to monitor student progress (Hosp, Hosp, & Howell, 2012). Curriculum-based measurement produces accurate, meaningful information about students' academic levels and their rates of improvement, and CBM corresponds well with high-stakes tests (Hosp et al., 2012).

Discrepancy model. The discrepancy model is used to identify students as having learning disabilities and requiring special education services (O'Donnell & Miller, 2011). Based upon interventions in the general education setting, the discrepancy model was found to be ineffective (Cavendish, 2013). In order to identify a student with a specific learning disability using the discrepancy model, evidence of a disorder must be found in one or more basic psychological processes as determined by at least one standardized instrument that determines intellectual functioning (O'Donnell & Miller, 2011). Also, evidence of academic achievement significantly below the level of intellectual functioning must be found in order for a student to be identified with a

specific learning disability (O'Donnell & Miller, 2011). A significant discrepancy is required for students below the age of seven, a discrepancy of at least one standard deviation is required for students ages seven through 10, and a discrepancy of one and one-half standard deviations is required for students ages 11 and above (Test, Kemp-Inman, Diegelmann, Hitt, & Bethune, 2015). A severe discrepancy is said to exist when achievement in one or more academic areas falls at or below 50% of the student's expected achievement level (Turse & Albrecht, 2015).

Early warning system. An early warning system is a program that uses readily available academic and behavior data to identify students who are at risk of dropping out of high school (Brockman, 2016). Identified students can then be matched with interventions to help them get on-track for graduation (Brockman, 2016).

Essential components of RtI. The essential components of RtI include universal screening, data collection, progress monitoring, a problem-solving team, data-based decision making, and evidence-based interventions (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012).

Fidelity of intervention implementation (Fidelity of treatment). There is little consensus as to the definition of intervention fidelity, but five aspects have been identified as mandatory for fidelity of interventions: (a) adherence to program components delivered as prescribed, (b) student exposure to academic intervention content, (c) quality of delivery based upon theory in terms of process and content, (d) participant responsiveness or engagement of the students, and (e) program differentiation based upon unique features of the intervention and distinguishable from other simultaneous programs (Harn, Parisi Damico, & Stoolmiller, 2017).

Learning disability/specific learning disability. A student is deemed to have a learning disability if the student does not make adequate gains/growth for the student's age or does not meet state-approved grade-level standards when provided with learning experiences (Aron & Loprest, 2012). A student with a learning disability does not meet grade-level expectations in one or more of the following areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, basic reading skills, reading fluency skills, reading comprehension, mathematics calculation, or mathematics problem solving (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2006).

Multi-tiered systems of support. Multi-tiered systems of support are systemic and continuous-improvement frameworks in which data-based problem solving and decision making are practiced across all levels of the educational system for the purpose of supporting students (Forman & Crystal, 2015).

Perceptions of RtI/MTSS skills. The likelihood of educators embracing new practices increases when they understand the need for the new practices and perceive they either have the skills or will receive support to implement the new practices (Fullan, 2015). For this study, perceptions of RtI/MTSS skills were defined as educator perceptions of the current skills they possess in order to implement RtI/MTSS (Castillo et al., 2012).

Response to intervention (RtI). The RtI model includes evidence-based practices and programs incorporated to instruct and assist students who are struggling academically and/or behaviorally (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014). The RtI framework integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-tiered prevention system to

maximize student achievement and to reduce behavioral and academic problems (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2017).

Rural. The United States Census Bureau defined rural as "encompass[ing] all population, housing, and territory not included within an urban area" (Moeller & Becnel, 2015, p. 2).

Special education teacher. A special education teacher is a teacher trained to use various techniques to promote learning (Lesh, 2013). Teaching methods can include intensive individualized instruction, problem-solving assignments, and small group work (Lesh, 2013). When students need special accommodations to learn in the general education environment, special education teachers ensure the appropriate accommodations are provided to students (Björn et al., 2016).

Limitations and Assumptions

Survey-based research has distinguishable limitations (Bonometti & Tang, 2006). Response rate is always a concern and has a direct correlation to sample size (Greenwood & Shleifer, 2014). A low response rate degrades the validity of the inferences made (Biemer, Groves, Lyberg, Mathiowetz, & Sudman, 2011). Despite these limitations, surveys remain the preferred strategy for determining perceptions, getting insight on levels of experience, identifying program characteristics, and discovering professional development needs of administrators and educators in rural secondary schools (Yin, 2013).

Self-selection bias is another limitation of online survey research (Wright, 2005). In any survey, electronic or otherwise, some individuals are more likely than others to complete an online survey (Yin, 2013). Those with an inclination to respond, versus

those with a proclivity to ignore, give opportunity for built-in bias within the research (Yin, 2013). Additionally, ardent supporters and equally fervent detractors tend to be more likely responders to a survey, thus having more influence on the results (Creswell, 2014). The number of respondents who choose to respond to a survey question may be different from those who choose not to respond, thus creating survey bias (Frost & Kersten, 2011). Additional survey bias can be introduced by the survey questions themselves (Creswell, 2014). Because answer options are subject to respondents' interpretation, data can be predisposed to the effect of attitude (Frost & Kersten, 2011).

Two general strategies exist to mitigate the potential bias affecting survey-based research: incentivizing and replication (Gächter & Renner, 2010). Incentivizing participation has been a longstanding and proven practice for increasing response rates (Creswell, 2014). Increasing the original sample size can achieve a similar goal by providing enough responses to mitigate inherent biases (Creswell, 2014). Bias mitigation using replication refers to conducting multiple surveys with the same or similar types of respondents (Craighead, Ketchen, Dunn, & Hult, 2011). This procedure has proven to be an effective way for researchers to gain a more reliable picture of the characteristics of the survey participants (Wright, 2005).

Other limitations relate to the wide variations of MTSS programs such as RtI in rural secondary schools (Bellamy, Crockett, & Nordengren, 2014). The widely studied prototypical RtI system is being applied primarily in the elementary levels of urban schools (Satter & Dunn, 2012). Any conclusive models of RtI for the secondary level, particularly from states where the program has been mandated, are noticeably absent and

completely ignore many differences between urban and rural schools (Vaillancourt, 2012).

Another limitation exists due to the myriad of variations within rural secondary schools. That, in addition to the lack of conclusive direction, results in variations to individual perceptions. In other words, each person's definition of an MTSS program like RtI is heavily dependent upon the variables unique to his or her school (Forman & Crystal, 2015). This researcher was not able to rely on a fixed statewide template of RtI from which to use data for comparison. Therefore, when studying an RtI program within rural secondary schools in Missouri, it was necessary to limit the variation by focusing on set identifiable challenges faced by administrators and educators (Howser, 2015). Those challenges include the following:

- Limited opportunity for collaboration exists based upon how classes are scheduled. Collaboration among educators, students, and parents at the secondary level presents challenges in scheduling and time demands (Fuchs et al., 2015). Common plan times would be an example of addressing teacher collaboration; however, it is uncommon to see such an arrangement in secondary schedules (Fuchs et al., 2015).
- The limited resource of time is a precious commodity in the age of school accountability. Development and implementation of an RtI program requires a commitment that either takes time away from instruction or tasks teachers outside of contracted time (Cowan & Maxwell, 2015). Imbedded intervention time can be scheduled but always at the cost of some other priority (Cowan & Maxwell, 2015).

- Teacher responsibilities are affected by grade level and the environment within which the teacher is working. In addition to having more students on their rosters, secondary teachers are coaches, club/class sponsors, committee members, etc. (Emmer & Evertson, 2016). Teachers in rural secondary schools are often tasked with more responsibilities than just being classroom instructors (Cavalluzzo, Barrow, Mokher, Geraghty, & Sartain, 2015).
- Encumbering bureaucracy is exhibited in the volumes of documentation found within standardized RtI programs (Sparks, 2016). What exactly do teachers need to be documenting, how much documentation is sufficient, and what documentation do teachers need to retain (Werts, Carpenter, & Fewell, 2014)?
- Staff perceptions and beliefs are influenced by a lack of professional development (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014). Perhaps the largest challenge centers on the variations students experience between different schools and within individual schools when programs lack specific direction and adequate professional training for the implementers (Isbell & Szabo, 2014).

Another limitation centers on this being a regional study, while most of the existing research is at the national level (Bedford & Casbergue, 2012). This study was conducted in rural southwest Missouri where similarities in demographics are conspicuous. In other words, the rural populations on which this study focused are culturally homogeneous, while the urban areas studied in previous RtI research were of varying social composition (Bedford & Casbergue, 2012). The limitation, then, is having to consider how germane existing research on MTSS, and specifically RtI, is to this study. As a result, the findings of this study are more homogeneous, and the primary data collection tools (interviews

and self-reporting surveys) may have elicited results more about the region's demographics than about perceptions, beliefs, and implementation practices.

Summary

Development of educational pedagogy in America during the last three decades can be traced through legislation and political decree. One highly observable transformation has been the introduction and expansion of intervention-based strategies intended to remedy academic deficiency (Runge, Lillenstein, & Kovaleski, 2016). The RtI model was originally intended as an intervention designed to support struggling readers in kindergarten through third grade (O'Connor, Bocian, Beach, Sanchez, & Flynn, 2013). During RtI's progression, its framework has expanded from being a program to support struggling elementary-age readers to being the leading method of identifying elementary students who might benefit from special education services and then expanding into the middle and secondary grades for both academic and behavioral intervention (Mitchell, 2014). Considering its origins, research into the implementation, process, and effectiveness of RtI is readily available to support elementary administrators and staff (Burns & Gibbons, 2013). This is substantiated by numerous field studies which have, and continue, to focus on RtI models used at the elementary grades (Bineham, Shelby, Pazey, & Yates, 2014). Conversely, secondary-level educators have faced the challenge of implementing intervention-based programs with a scarcity of scholarly research applicable to their unique reality (Skelding-Dills, 2013).

Many secondary schools throughout the country have adopted RtI as their primary intervention model for addressing academic deficiency (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014). The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe how rural high schools have

implemented RtI and to promote understanding of the realities faced by secondary-level administrators and educators. Ultimately, this project could provide educators in rural secondary schools with data to support the implementation and operationalization of RtI.

Response to intervention frameworks found in the literature include the following: (a) a structured focus on preventing academic failures, (b) the use of a standardized RtI model consistently and with fidelity, and (c) a strong consideration for adoption of the suggested framework using the essential components of RtI (RtI Action Network, 2013). The researcher attempted to determine if high schools implement the essential components of RtI with fidelity (Chandler, 2015). This project was designed to examine the essential components of an RtI framework and the application of RtI in rural secondary schools. Based on previous conversations with secondary-level administrators in a specific southwest Missouri conference, RtI action plans have been realized and are currently used as the primary means of academic intervention in all seven high schools.

Collaboration with practicing secondary educators is crucial. Hollenbeck (2007) stated:

> Rather than downplaying the district, school, and individual factors that affect both sustainability of practice and decision-making, researchers are urged to embrace these challenges and consider ways to further their knowledge of the RTI construct while exploring supports for local school districts, building principals, and individual teachers in the complexities of implementing systemic change. (p. 144)

This project was designed to contribute to that high purpose.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

The purpose of this study was to understand factors affecting RtI implementation and operationalization specific to rural secondary schools. The intention was to discover and illustrate a framework for implementing and operationalizing RtI unique to the constructs of rural secondary schools by exploring the attitudes, insights, and experiences of educators and administrators who have implemented and are currently operationalizing RtI. Data collection occurred through focus group interviews and document collection.

Chapter Two represents a review of the scholarly record on the implementation and operationalization of RtI. The literature review includes information on RtI's beginnings, including a chronicle on educational reform movements, subsequent jurisprudence, and features of the educational system designed to satisfy contemporary accountability expectations. The essential components of RtI are described along with information discovered by the researcher on RtI and its use at the secondary level in rural schools.

Response to Intervention's Origins

During the latter half of the 20th century and into the first decade of the 21st, acts of federal and state jurisprudence ensured that multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), such as response to intervention (RtI), became expected within the educational profession (Kemmis et al., 2013). Those championing RtI's nationwide adoption into the educational pedagogy established a unified campaign to reshape the educational system by putting forth models of reform rooted in standardization, tiered interventions, and progress monitoring (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011). Those seeking educational reform seem to make two primary suppositions (Sterling, 2017). First, all students, regardless of how disparate their individual characteristics (namely intellectual

development, motivation, attitudes, learning styles, socio-economic status, race, and parental support), can be precisely labeled, thus allowing for the application of standardized solutions (Sterling, 2017). Secondly, variation among the nation's schools either does not exist or is not considered significant enough to take into consideration (Sterling, 2017). The supposition seems to be that all public schools in the U.S. exist within the same homogeneous reality, where a multitude of variables (attitudes and perceptions, enrollment size, funding, community socio-economic status, teacher training, and variations in local government) are inconsequential (Canter et al., 2008). There are few examples of RtI implemented to account for a particular school's realities, so educators remain tasked with figuring it out within their districts (Bilton, 2011).

As with any complex social program, RtI programs are designed to manage variables (Deno, 2016). At the core of any RtI program is the commitment to data-based decision making (Deno, 2016). This data-based program modification (DBPM) model is what allows teachers and administrators the flexibility to manage variables unique to their particular reality (Deno, 2016). In other words, advocates of RtI use research findings about DBPM as evidence RtI provides facilitators the ability to adapt the program to all educational realities (Buffum & Mattos, 2014). Many educators and administrators tasked with implementation of RtI falter in the area of data-based decision making (Canter et al., 2008). This, coupled with a lack of professional development at the secondary level and a lack of RtI research in rural areas, seems to imply successful RtI programs in rural secondary schools can be especially challenging.

This project was designed to investigate the challenges that result from mandates placed upon educators and administrators in rural secondary schools. Accordingly, this

investigator sought to understand RtI in relation to administrator and teacher perceptions, local diversity, application at secondary grade levels, necessary resources, and investment in teacher training. Commentators on MTSS programs take the stance these variables are discounted (Urso, 2011). This study could highlight the idea schools are much more heterogeneous than reformers recognize, and homogeneous programs can lead either to ineffectiveness or adaptation. This investigation has the potential to provide insight into specific difficulties and strategies for rural secondary schools when implementing an RtI template designed in urban environments.

Legislative History of Response to Intervention

Movements to reform U.S. public education in the late 20th century and early 21st century greatly influenced U.S. jurisprudence, which led to fundamental changes in academic pedagogy (Rader, 2015). The beginnings of this contemporary public educational reform can be attributed to the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson (Ravitch, 2016). In 1965, the ESEA became law and was intended to be the blueprint for improving the nation's schools (Frankenberg & Taylor, 2015). Legislation like the EHA of 1975, the IDEA of 1990, NCLB, the EHA of 2001, and the IDEIA of 2004 led to evidence-based and intervention-based pedagogies becoming centerpieces of U.S. schools (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011). It seems to be commonly accepted in the literature that the 2002 NCLB Act and the IDEIA of 2004 directly established a mandate for evidence-based intervention strategies in public schools (Greenwood et al., 2011). Interestingly, these acts of federal jurisprudence left it up to the states to determine the exact configuration of intervention programs and how those programs should be implemented (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011).

Opportunity for modification and reform came about, in part, because the ESEA was required to be reauthorized by Congress every five years (Frankenberg & Taylor, 2015). In 2002, then-President George W. Bush's administration reengineered the ESEA and transformed it into the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (McGuinn, 2016). Their rationale centered on the belief that despite reforms like the ESEA, schools failed to close the gap between achievement scores of economically advantaged, primarily non-minority students, and economically disadvantaged, predominantly minority students (Simmons, 2011). The belief was that NCLB, by compelling states to implement school accountability systems based on annual student assessments, would effectively address these ongoing failings and lead to improved services for underprivileged students (Fletcher, Coulter, Reschly, & Vaughn, 2004).

Because of its endorsement of data monitoring, tiered intervention frameworks, and targeted services, NCLB provided a mandate for intervention strategies designed to support failing learners within an RtI-like framework (Kavale, Kauffman, Bachmeier, & LeFever, 2008). While NCLB introduced punitive measures for academic underperformance, it endorsed the use of data analysis and promoted a tiered framework as a means to address this underperformance (Mullan, 2015). In 2004, adoption of the IDEIA reinforced the mandate for intervention frameworks by requiring districts to implement evidence-based and data-oriented tiered supports (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011). This legislation bolstered the reform mandate by obliging schools to both address struggling learners and to facilitate better performance on assessments (Hollenbeck, 2007).

According to Lee (2012), the IDEIA coalesced support of multi-tiered frameworks for struggling students. The IDEIA expressly addresses and supports processes which measure a student's response to interventions: "In determining whether a child has a specific learning disability, a local educational agency may use a process that determines if the child responds to scientific, research-based intervention as a part of the evaluation procedures" (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). Response to intervention, largely because it incorporates measurement of progress, gained support and supplanted established programs such as the ability-achievement discrepancy model (Preston, Wood, & Stecker, 2016). It did so by offering identification and expanded intervention systems to support academically struggling students (Spencer at el., 2014).

In addition to examining federal legislation into the origins of RtI and subsequent authorization of intervention strategies, the literature on RtI delves into the influence of several national committees and commissions, their recommendations for reform practices, and specific support for RtI models (Preston et al., 2016). The President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education convened in 2001 and recommended adoption of school-based service delivery focusing on the following:

- the needs of children with disabilities in general educational settings;
- student outcomes rather than processes; and
- the implementation of evidence-based practices for prevention and early intervention (Schroeder, Plata, Fullwood, Price, & Sennette, 2013).

Another commission, the National Research Council Panel on Minority Overrepresentation, released two reports which emphasized the use of screening and

multi-tiered interventions to promote equal access to high-quality early childhood interventions (Dillard, 2017). This council advocated the use of response to high-quality interventions implemented with fidelity to determine eligibility for special education services (Dillard, 2017). Bradley and Danielson (2004) described the activities of the members of the National Summit on Learning Disabilities, who in 2002, endorsed RtI and publicly called RtI "…the most promising method of alternative identification" (p. 188).

Further investigations supported the sentiment on RtI and acknowledged RtI promotes the implementation of effective practices in schools (Bradley, Danielson, & Hallahan, 2002). These important national committees all endorsed practices in direct alignment with a high-quality RtI approach to service delivery in schools (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2017). In addition, all reports highlighted the problems inherent in the current system of service delivery and in the means for verifying students as eligible for special education under the category of learning disabilities (Buffum & Mattos, 2014).

The RtI framework gained national attention and awareness as a result of these endorsements (Perry, 2012). Yet even with the influence of a national reform movement, the rule of law, and the willingness of educators to support struggling learners, there are limited offerings to guide secondary schools on implementation and operationalization of RtI frameworks (Williams & Nierengarten, 2010). Many questions remain about how secondary schools are to implement and operationalize RtI, how to manage perceptions and change, and what procedures can be used to overcome operational obstacles unique to those grade levels (Cartwright, 2016; Fisher & Frey, 2013; Lopez, 2015).

Response to Intervention Framework

Response to intervention is not new to the field of education (Fuchs & Vaughn, 2012). Certain characteristics integrated within an RtI model have been a part of the educational pedagogy since the 1970s and 1980s (Deno, 2014). Early in the history of intervention models, RtI was designed to serve individual elementary-level students and to identify those students who qualified for special education (Deno, 2014).

Shapiro (2011) described RtI programs as having a preemptive approach designed to prevent academic problems from happening while also remediating existing academic failings. The RtI model is a tiered approach to identifying struggling students by using progress-monitoring measures responsive to change, assisting teachers by offering research on best practices, establishing a framework for sustaining fidelity, and requiring teachers and administrators to manage interventions using a data-centered model (Grosche & Volpe, 2013). Burns et al. (2016) described RtI as characterized by a multi-tiered framework intended to triage struggling learners and to address academic maladies through precise identification of deficiency, targeted mediation, progress monitoring, and data-driven determinations of benchmarks and improvement.

The RtI model uses assessment and staff appraisal as the primary data collection tools (Eagle, Dowd-Eagle, Snyder, & Holtzman, 2015). For many, RtI is perhaps best recognized for its targeted interventions component (Buffum & Mattos, 2014). Success for an RtI program is transforming struggling students into successful learners while transitioning those who continue to struggle into special education programs (Moreno, 2015). Response to intervention can be understood as a program intended to facilitate improvement above and beyond the standard academic paradigm (Kuo, 2014).

According to Samuels (2008), “Response to intervention is an educational framework that promises to raise achievement through modification of lesson plans based on frequent ‘progress monitoring’ and is one of the most-discussed education topics today” (p. 28). These multi-tiered systems are typically composed of three to four tiers of evidence-based interventions, and each tier becomes progressively more targeted based upon student responses to the interventions (Hoover & Patton, 2008). An RtI system involves collecting individual academic performance data, working through a diagnostic process for each struggling student, applying tiered interventions, progress monitoring, and in cases where improvement is not realized, referring a student to special education services (Mellard & Johnson, 2007). Response to intervention, like many other systematic processes active within organizations, provides the opportunity to illustrate correlations between program efficacy and the ability of the staff to organize, support, and implement the changes necessary to embed new procedures into the existing culture (Culot, 2011).

A principal, as a matter of job description, is tasked with supervising regular and special education teachers who are directly responsible for implementation and execution of an RtI program (Culot, 2011). This suggests every school principal, while not necessarily having a specialized background in RtI, is required to understand the processes of RtI in order to support implementation and execution for the benefit of students (Prewett et al., 2012). Leadership styles have influence, positively and negatively, on the implementation and execution of RtI programs (Sansosti & Noltemeyer, 2008).

High-Quality Instruction

Teacher efficacy is the idea teacher skillsets determine the outcomes of student learning and student behavior (Isbell & Szabo, 2014). Research into educational best practices consistently shows teacher efficacy is one of the most important elements in the success of intervention programs (Shanahan, 2008). Variables which affect teacher efficacy include the level of support received, the structure of the organization, and skill level with which the teacher manages the classroom (Pajares & Graham, 1999).

With RtI becoming increasingly popular, studies have focused on aspects such as implementation and the effect of RtI on teachers and administrators (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014). Improved teacher efficacy positively affects and strengthens interventions, leading to improved student performance (Tupou, 2013). Goddard, Goddard, Sook Kim, and Miller (2015) investigated variables associated with RtI involvement and implementation and their relationship with teacher efficacy. A significant association was found between the actions of the teacher and the outcomes of those actions (Goddard et al., 2015). The study was focused on training for teachers intended to increase operational knowledge and to build self-assurance in the ability to manage RtI and effect positive student outcomes (Goddard et al., 2015).

Goddard et al. (2015) also discovered some inverse relationships between teacher efficacy and implementation of RtI when external variables were introduced (e.g., home and family life, community demographics, presence of drugs-alcohol-violence, etc.). These outside variables were not within the control of teachers and undermined teacher efficacy and RtI success (Goddard et al., 2015). Outside factors represent impediments to the implementation and effectiveness of RtI (Goddard et al., 2015).

Common Assessments

Response to intervention is highlighted by its emphasis on being a preemptive and preventative model designed as a system of early identification and school-wide intervention for struggling learners (Eklund, 2011). Operationally, RtI is structured around the practice of universal screening through an assessment system for all students, followed by progress monitoring for those students identified as needing intervention (Berkeley, Bender, Peaster, & Saunders, 2009). The most widely used progress monitoring system is curriculum-based measurement (CBM) (Machek & Nelson, 2010; Vaughn & Fletcher, 2012).

As the operationalization of MTSS has progressed, it is necessary to note that RtI and CBM have essentially merged in significance; therefore, any investigation of RtI cannot ignore CBM (Eklund, 2011). Recognition of the importance of CBM and of its integration within RtI was necessary to this investigation into RtI's adaptability and effectiveness in rural secondary schools. Research conducted since the early 1980s has verified CBMs are reliable and effective indicators of student performance in core subject areas (Bamonto-Graney & Shinn, 2005; Capizzi & Barton-Arwood, 2009). Furthermore, according to Pamela Stecker, Lynn Fuchs, and Douglas Fuchs (2005), use of CBMs has "…produced significant gains in student achievement" (p. 795).

Universal Screening

Data gathering for many professions is done using universally accepted screening procedures (Appelbaum, 2008). Teachers and doctors share many similarities when it comes to universal screening; both teachers and doctors gather data to assess the condition of those they serve (Walker & Colledge, 2013). For example, medical doctors

use universally accepted methods for diagnosing the conditions of patients (Walker & Colledge, 2013). Those methods include measuring blood pressure, recording temperature, and analyzing blood chemistry (Hall, 2013). Teachers gather data through universally accepted methods for diagnosing the condition of their students' mastery of content (Appelbaum, 2008). Those methods include benchmarking, informal and formal assessments, and sampling (Fuchs, Compton, Fuchs, Bouton, & Caffrey, 2011). In both professions, data are collected, norms are determined, problems are identified, evidence-based interventions are commissioned, and difficulties are addressed (Hudson et al., 2016).

Research into academic intervention for struggling learners supports the utility of universal screening, particularly in the areas of writing, math, and behavior (Fuchs et al., 2011). Universal screening is a method for identifying students who are considered at-risk and who could benefit from additional instruction (Kettler, Glover, Albers, & Feeney-Kettler, 2014). Traditionally, universal screening has been used within the RtI framework to find students who are at-risk for reading difficulties and either leads to further screening or a combination of further screening and individualized intervention (Mellard & Johnson, 2007).

According to Compton et al. (2012), screening should identify students who need further assessment, be practical, produce beneficial results, and lead to the best allocation of resources. Compton et al. (2012) went on to explain universal screening has to be precise, although if screeners err, they should do so by providing false positives instead of negatives, thus preventing the misallocation of resources for services to students who are not in need. However, false positives can disadvantage students by leading to a delay

in interventions (Compton et al., 2012). Additionally, false positives can compound a delay in intervention services in smaller schools, because the screener is also likely to be the person providing the intervention (Guy et al., 2016).

Efficacy in screening is directly impacted by the creation of benchmarks (Fontenot, 2015). The establishment of benchmarks is up to individual schools employing RtI frameworks; schools determine when to further screen students who are consistently performing right at the benchmark (Fontenot, 2015). Benchmarks are influenced by the type of screening used (Fuchs et al., 2011). The two common types of screening are criterion-referenced assessments and norm-referenced assessments (Lok, McNaught, & Young, 2016). Criterion-referenced assessments (often referred to as mastery tests) are normally written by the subject teacher (Norcini & McKinley, 2017). These assessments typically have a defined cut score; for example, should the test taker's score exceed the cut score, the student passes (Burns & Gibbons, 2013). Conversely, should the test score fall below the cut score, the student fails (Burns & Gibbons, 2013).

Norm-referenced assessments are estimates of performance based upon scores generated by a particular population of test takers (Robst & VanGilder, 2016). Norm-referenced assessments measure the performance of a test taker in comparison to the performance of other test takers (Robst & VanGilder, 2016). They do not measure if the test taker has mastered specific learner objectives (Robst & VanGilder, 2016). As such, criterion-referenced screening is favored as the data collection device for RtI, because it delivers specific information on content mastery for individual students, thus directly facilitating the implementation of specific interventions (Burns et al., 2016).

Tiered Interventions

Within an RtI model, timely interventions are systematically implemented within a framework of tiers and target the deficiencies of individual students (Marston, Wallace, Thompson, Lau, & Muyskens, 2011). According to Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2010), it is necessary to act on a student's behalf when universal screening identifies an underperforming student. Research suggests RtI frameworks are as varied in composition as the proficiency of those implementing RtI (Marston et al., 2011). Because of this changeability in the human variable, along with the absence of any one particular RtI template, the number of tiers, elements used for screening, application and frequency of interventions, and duration of services seem to vary (Marston et al., 2011). The literature indicates there is commonality among RtI programs in that all consist of a tiered system with varied degrees of deficiency and intensity of intervention (Jimerson, Burns, & VanDerHeyden, 2016). Intensive intervention for at-risk students provides additional academic time focused on reading instruction and practice (Skelding-Dills, 2013).

In a common RtI model, tier one is the stage where universal screening and progress monitoring take place (Burns & Gibbons, 2013). Tier one is the foundational and universal stage for all students within an RtI program (Skelding-Dills, 2013). Fuchs et al. (2011) described tier one as consisting of high-quality core classroom instruction using research-based best practices and as the foremost support and intervention to prevent academic deficiency. In 2016, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education described RtI tier one as proactive and preventative.

During the tier one experience, data are collected and then analyzed to make decisions about quality of instruction and whether changes are needed (Burns & Gibbons, 2013). During the tier one phase, educators classify the capacity of individual students to learn while continuing to provide quality teaching (Narvey, 2012). This method of progress monitoring is conducted to determine if additional supports are needed and for whom (Lee, 2012). It is important teachers understand the importance of quality of teaching and the need for quality of teaching to be consistent (Bilton, 2011). If the quality of teaching is variable, accurate identification of students who need support becomes difficult (Lee, 2012).

Tiers two and three of RtI are the primary intervention levels used for reducing the number of struggling students or for referring student to special services (Tilly, Harken, Robinson, & Kurns, 2008). Fuchs, Fuchs, and Compton (2012) asserted prompt, evidence-based interventions are fundamental to a struggling student returning to the general education classroom or being referred for evaluation and possible special education services. A multi-tiered system of identifying deficiency and providing intervention is an effective way to allocate resources and provide students with the supports they need (Fuchs et al., 2012).

Continuous Progress Monitoring

The RtI process includes an element known as progress monitoring. Progress monitoring is the process of collecting and interpreting data to determine the effectiveness of interventions and whether modifications need to be made (Jimerson, Stein, Haddock, & Shahroozi, 2016). As data accrue, deductions can be made about a student's response to particular interventions (Skipp & Hopwood, 2017). The data

indicate whether a student is responsive to intervention or not, and decisions based upon the data are said to be targeted and applicable (Vaughn & Fletcher, 2012). Vaughn and Fletcher (2012) contended students receiving tier two interventions should be progress monitored weekly, bi-monthly, or monthly.

Noted scholars have asserted the concept of progress monitoring is based upon the inherent assumption students benefit from first-rate teaching (Johnson, Smith, & Harris, 2009). This has been extrapolated further to infer if interventions are first-rate, one of three results will occur:

1. A student returns to tier one after having deficiencies addressed in tier two (Dexter, Hughes, & Farmer, 2008).
2. A student stays in tier two for further intervention (Patrikakou, Ockerman, & Hollenbeck, 2016).
3. Student deficiencies are identified as acute and beyond the capability of tier two and so warrant a referral to special education for further services (tier three) (Wright, 2009).

In 2005, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education outlined nine essential features of progress monitoring for successful intervention:

1. Assess the specific mastery of state and local academic standards.
2. Assess marker variables proven to lead toward the ultimate instructional target.
3. Pay close attention to small increments of growth over time.
4. Administer monitoring competently over short periods.
5. Administer monitoring continually.
6. Generate and summarize data in teacher-friendly presentations.

7. Comparably monitor students.
8. Monitor an individual student's progress over time consistently.
9. Base interventions on appropriate instructional strategies and use appropriate curriculum which targets the area of need. (as cited in Nettleton & Edge, 2012, pp. 25-26)

Progress monitoring techniques are rooted in the three tiers of RtI (Johnson & Mellard, 2014). Deno (2014) described general tier one screening as procedures utilized to determine which students are at-risk based upon each student's performance against a benchmark measure for the assigned task. Progress monitoring in tier one can be a linear measure of content mastery, establishing a record of academic performance to show individual development over time, to identify student regression, and to determine what curricular and/or instructional changes are warranted (Deno, 2016). Such an approach gives teachers the necessary data to determine student proficiency and identify students who qualify for additional support (Johnson et al., 2009).

According to Johnson and Mellard (2014), the role of progress monitoring changes at tiers two and three and becomes a determinate of intervention effectiveness. Furthermore, the collection of data through progress monitoring gives teachers the chance to decide if interventions should be modified, or if a recommendation should be made to special education to evaluate a student for services (Fuchs et al., 2012). The timeliness of decisions is also enhanced by frequent progress monitoring (Johnson & Mellard, 2014). Fuchs et al. (2011) suggested progress monitoring at least twice a week, putting data into graph form, and strictly adhering to a set of rules for determining student progress.

Fidelity

Walter and Drury (2014) defined fidelity, within the context of MTSS programs, as a measure of implementation and application which adheres strictly to the original plan. Fidelity in education is regularly evaluated using checklists that detail what methods of instruction are used and the length of time those methods are in effect (Mellard, Prewett, & Deshler, 2012). Fidelity in a particular educational system is the measure of integrity with which screening and progress monitoring are conducted (Vaillancourt, 2012). It is commonly accepted that RtI fidelity should be assessed at both the school-wide and teacher level in the areas of implementation, progress monitoring, and instruction (Jimerson, Burns et al., 2016). Ruffini, Miskell, Lindsay, McInerney, and Waite (2016) described the key components of fidelity as follows:

- following a systematic curriculum;
- providing effective and direct instruction;
- using specific instructional materials;
- utilizing a checklist of fundamental instructional components;
- video-taping or observing classroom instruction;
- graphing results against goals; and
- basing decisions regarding curriculum and instruction on data (Ruffini et al., 2016).

A number of studies have verified the significance of fidelity. Those include Burns et al. (2016), Cowan and Maxwell (2015), Jimerson, Burns et al. (2016), Mellard et al. (2012), and Vaillancourt (2012). These studies involved determining if a high degree of fidelity in implementation of RtI actually affects students positively (Johnson & Mellard, 2014).

Vaillancourt (2012) described three indicators of fidelity in relation to RtI implementation:

- 80 to 85% of students in the sample pass assessments;
- student performance improves over time once interventions are employed; and
- students are on an identifiable course toward content mastery.

Gearing et al. (2011) described a direct and indirect method to measure fidelity through assessment. Such assessment is founded upon observations of the teacher and students, teacher questionnaires, self-reflection, and recordings of instruction (Vaillancourt, 2012).

Mundschenk and Fuchs (2016) also described how intervention fidelity can be assessed, communicating that in tiers two and three, appraisal should focus on method of implementation, frequency of application, and availability of support systems. This research was derived from previous investigations into fidelity and its function within RtI implementation (Johnson & Mellard, 2014). Burns et al. (2016) investigated the experience level of the teacher and the effect this had on fidelity. Specifically, the teacher's experience level affected the teacher's request for support, the performance of students, and a change in referrals to special education (Vaillancourt, 2012). Fidelity was directly affected by teacher support, in the form of professional development, and resource allocation (Robinson, Bursuck, & Sinclair, 2013).

Response to Intervention—Differences Among Schools

Response to intervention's cumulative popularity has led to it being one of the most-investigated educational reform topics in U.S. history (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). In the contemporary educational setting, RtI has become widely recognized for specific characteristics: multiple tiers, progress monitoring, intervention

strategies, early identification of struggling learners, targeted supports, precise performance data, and placement into special education (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011). Despite considerable recognition, there have been few formal examinations into how school administrators and teachers are to actually implement RtI within their particular schools (Thompson, 2017).

Even though RtI has now been in practice for three decades, and there has been extensive research into operationalizing and managing RtI-like programs, there are interesting absences within the investigative record (Carter, 2013). For example, in all 12 states where RtI implementation is mandated, the guidance to do so is specifically applicable only to elementary grades (Berkeley et al., 2009). Information on RtI implementation and support for secondary teachers and administrators is difficult to find (Robinson et al., 2013). In additional to this lack of research-based support, two different approaches are being used for implementing RtI: the problem-solving approach and the standard-protocol approach (Grosche & Volpe, 2013).

According to King and Coughlin (2016), most U.S. school districts are applying the problem-solving approach to RtI. Of the 17 states where implementation of RtI is mandated by legislative decree, some states provide templates to aid in implementation of RtI while others offer generalized suggestions for how to accomplish the task (Arden, Gandhi, Zumeta Edmonds, & Danielson, 2017). In the RtI-mandated states, templates and suggestions tend to support the problem-solving method of RtI implementation (King & Coughlin, 2016). In the non-RtI-mandated states, no guidance exists. So, while some universals exist (targeted instruction, constant progress monitoring, and referrals for students requiring special education services), there are different variations of RtI and an

absence of convention for type of intervention program, how to implement and manage the program, and what is best practice for secondary schools in rural locations (King & Coughlin, 2016). In other words, while legislation has provided some schools with overriding mandates for MTSS, the actual task of how to implement programs like RtI has been deferred to individual schools, teachers, and administrators (Thorius & Maxcy, 2015).

Most academic examinations of RtI focus almost exclusively on urban school districts characterized by large enrollments, high percentages of minorities, and low socio-economic status (Shinn, Windram, & Bollman, 2016). The literature has also been predominantly confined to examining RtI in grades pre-K to six (Eklund, 2011). In other words, the amount of scholarly information about RtI programs in urban school districts is extensive, while information on RtI in rural secondary schools is almost non-existent (Guy et al., 2016).

There is a real need to assist rural secondary administrators and educators in understanding how to implement and operationalize RtI (Burns & Gibbons, 2013). Rural secondary schools must adhere to the same direct and indirect mandates to implement MTSS programs like RtI, and rural educators need scholarly support detailing frameworks applicable to their reality. Tilly (2008) pointed out the absence of research on RtI at the secondary level leads to those schools devising their own RtI-type frameworks. These improvisations may meet particular requirements while failing to provide positive support for struggling learners (Tilly, 2008).

Leadership and Organizational Change

The vision for a successful RtI program requires effective leadership (Fullan, 2015). Building leaders must be dedicated to principles that ensure high levels of success for all students (Mahoney, 2013). There is a considerable amount of research on managing organizational change available for review in the scholarly record. Much of this research indicates a primary ingredient for successful organizational change is strong leadership (Strohmyer, 2010). Northouse (2015) characterized strong leaders as having a collaborative style dedicated to ensuring all students have an opportunity to achieve. Wilson (2013) contributed to this inquiry, stating successful leadership is identifiable through frequent fidelity checks of curriculum, instruction, and interventions to confirm good practice produces academic success.

According to Burns and Gibbons (2013), the role of an effective RtI leader is to lead in a way that fosters a culture where evidence-based practice is the norm. Covey (2013) described four roles of leadership: modeling, path finding, aligning, and empowering. Epler (2015) expanded the inquiry and described the effective RtI leader as one who models data-based decisions while building trust with all stakeholders and fostering a collaborative culture. Other scholars, notably Buffum and Mattos (2014), suggested the effective RtI leader combines trustworthiness, character, and competence into a style that empowers staff members. Empowerment, in turn, fosters a culture where staff are willing to make the investments required for interventions to be successful (Castro, 2015). The organizational leader who empowers others first has to develop the conditions which allow others to choose to be empowered (Brown-Chidsey & Steege,

2011). The empowering leader inspires staff to make decisions about instruction and intervention (Huffman, Hipp, Pankake, & Moller, 2014).

Change within organizations introduces a highly complex and interconnected mix of human factors (Fullan, 2015). Those factors include core values and learned behaviors, features which must transform when people are tasked with bringing about organizational change (Fullan, 2015). Such an undertaking becomes proportionally complex when considering who is tasked with changing, how many people are involved, and whether those within the organizational structure view change as necessary or unneeded (Fullan, 2015).

Organizational change seems a straightforward process; however, according to Fullan (2015), in order to bring about more effective organizational change, leaders need to explain not only the necessity for change but must also influence those they lead. Leadership ability to manage the human factor supports organizational change (Mumford & Mecca, 2013). An administrator's leadership style has a direct influence upon the organization's ability to change (Mumford & Mecca, 2013). The most important human factors leaders need to manage include attitudes, feelings, relationships, and communication differences (Miller, 2014).

Fullan (2015) determined change, be it positive or negative, is resisted; opposition to change is a natural reaction. Resistance is not a leader's true challenge; it is common for new programs to underperform and even fail because of a leader's incapacity to manage the resulting situation, foresee the natural opposition, comprehend the dynamics, and act competently (Fullan, 2015). Leadership styles are on a spectrum (Fullan, 2004). On one end of this spectrum, administrators focus expressly on the technical components

of a project (e.g., goals, spreadsheets, dates, etc.) (Fullan, 2015). Conversely, an administrator may focus specifically on humanistic traits previously mentioned (e.g., relationships, attitudes, feelings, communication variations, etc.) (Fullan, 2015).

Triggering the change process depends upon an administrator recognizing his or her impact on an organization's culture and how that culture influences staff cooperation and the capacity to support a new program (Bernhardt & Hebert, 2011). Northouse (2015) described effective administrative leadership as having a vision of what should happen and being able to direct people toward that same vision. Kotter (2013) described effective leaders as having the ability to inspire people to overcome the obstacles to organizational change. Kotter (2013) noted specific difficulties of administrators including "over-managing" and "under-leading," stating organizations experience "more pushing than pulling, decisions are top down, and acceptance is demanded" (Whitlock, 2003, p. 14).

Cowan and Maxwell (2015) explored a bottom-up model of leadership. They examined educators, specifically school administrators, and the influence of professional development on change within school culture (Cowan & Maxwell, 2015). The findings suggested adoption of new pedagogy requires school leaders to have a good understanding of the most important components of change: fostering constructive relationships and enhancing individual skillsets (Cowan & Maxwell, 2015).

While resistance to change can certainly be expected as a constant, such opposition can be seen as proportional to the degree of change a staff has to accept and to how profoundly their roles are being redefined (Mellard et al., 2012). Datnow and Stringfield (2000) studied 13 school districts implementing significant educational

change programs. There was a positive relationship between effective district professional development support and degree of change accomplishment (Datnow & Stringfield, 2000). Inversely, McDaniel, Albritton, and Roach (2013) showed weak support of teacher professional development, along with characteristics of top-down leadership, led to lower teacher support and less effective implementation of new programs.

All-inclusive staff involvement, along with strong support for staff professional development, have much influence upon the course of organizational change and are decisive administrative considerations when managing organizational change (Rogers, 2011). Sansosti and Noltemeyer (2008), citing a study on the effects of principal leadership styles on school improvement, indicated, "Leadership style of principals could greatly influence the success of implementation" (Frigmanski, 2014, p. 60). The initial researchers, in 1984, studied the implementation of new curriculum (Hughes & Dexter, 2011). After two years, the researchers determined a strong correlation was evident between building administrator leadership styles and effectiveness of curriculum implementation (Harvey & Holland, 2011). Schools where implementation was considered high were led by principals classified as initiators (Idol & Jones, 2013). Schools where implementation was considered medium were led by principals classified as managers, and schools where implementation was considered low were led by principals classified as responders (Harvey & Holland, 2011).

When considering the effectiveness of RtI, Fuchs et al. (2012) indicated there exists a correlation between a school district's leadership structures and how effective RtI models are. These results further suggested top-down leadership has a negative effect

upon RtI models (Fuchs et al., 2011). Other research has shown leadership structures allowing staff members to have greater degrees of autonomy (otherwise known as bottom-up) have positive effects upon RtI models (Mellard at el., 2012). Preliminarily, there seems to be a correlation between the implementation of a successful RtI model with the ability of a principal to provide a vision and align others with that vision (Mellard at el., 2012).

It is evident a systematic change process, such as the implementation of an RtI model, requires the skillsets of more than one person (Kozleski & Huber, 2010). Administrators are challenged with not only setting the vision, but additionally aligning others with that vision (Mellard at el., 2012). Feuerborn, Sarin, and Tyre (2011) found creating staff member support necessitates developing awareness of, knowledge of, and interest in RtI. Sansosti and Noltemeyer (2008) referenced a study conducted by Turnbull (2002) about teacher buy-in. Of interest was the relationship between teacher buy-in and the effectiveness of school reform initiatives (Turnbull, 2002).

In the Turnbull (2002) study, 671 teachers involved in programs designed to establish multi-tiered support systems for underperforming students completed surveys assessing their levels of buy-in. The researchers determined the following seven variables influenced teacher buy-in: (a) training, (b) administrator buy-in, (c) developer support, (d) resources, (e) knowledge of budget, (f) influence in school-level implementation, and (g) control over classroom implementation (Wainwright, 2016). Additionally, Turnbull (2002) showed the importance of gaining teacher support in the early stages of implementation; teacher buy-in from year one is the biggest predictor of year two buy-in. For this reason, many researchers have emphasized the importance of

the building principal being well-trained and leading the initiative (Buffum & Mattos, 2014).

Williams (2014) stated the principal's role in implementing RtI is critical to the success of the program. The school principal must assume the role of advocate for all students, particularly for those students who are underperforming (Ehren, 2013). Spiegel (2009) sought to identify and examine leadership characteristics of principals who have successfully implemented RtI. The study included 12 participants (three secondary-level principals and nine certified professional staff members) at three study sites, each of which can be described as traditional, comprehensive high schools (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). In the Spiegel (2009) study, six major characteristics were identified as indicative of principals who have successfully implemented the innovation of RtI in their schools: (a) participants in the RtI process; (b) effective communicators; (c) supportive of staff members; (d) effectively allocate resources to support RtI implementation; (e) identify high performers and rely on their expertise in the RtI efforts; and (f) proficient at using data to inform decision making.

Harkins (2009) conducted qualitative research to investigate best practices for response to intervention. In this study, educators completed an open-ended survey questionnaire which seemed show a correlation between meeting the needs of all students and the application of effective leadership (Harkins, 2009). Studies referencing Harkins (2009), notably Alexander (2012), indicated communication among the principal, teachers, parents, and other educational professionals was key to a successful RtI program. Alexander (2012) furthered the idea good leadership increases the successful implementation of RTI, reiterating this information appears throughout the research.

Mellard et al. (2012) conducted a study in an attempt to gain a more in-depth understanding of secondary RtI implementation processes by interviewing administrators and then comparing their responses with the four essential components of RtI. The essential components, according to Goeke, Mitchem, and Kossar (2017), are as follows: (a) a school-wide, multi-level instructional and behavioral system for preventing school failure; (b) screening; (c) progress monitoring; and (d) data-based decision making for instruction. Mellard et al. (2012) concluded schools "…demonstrating the highest levels of RtI implementation also demonstrated the highest levels of district and principal leadership" (p. 31). By interviewing staff members, Mellard et al. (2012) were able to identify common responses, including the impression principals were fully involved in and invested in the RtI implementation process. Four common themes were identified by Mellard et al. (2012):

1. Principals put forth implementation plans which included sufficient time for teachers to incorporate RtI into their already established routines (Mellard et al., 2012).
2. Buy-in was attained because principals were directly involved in RtI planning and implementation (Mellard et al., 2012).
3. RtI implementation was presented as an expectation by the principals and was integrated into the school's culture (Mellard et al., 2012).
4. Principals planned for and provided resources needed for implementation and maintenance of an RtI program (Mellard et al., 2012).

The central conclusion from Mellard et al. (2012) was that school administrators must understand their roles in supporting organizational change involving multiple staff

members and must provide a plan to promote problem-solving, detailed solutions, and adaptation to changing culture and attitudes.

Variations on RtI Models: The Two Methods

Although RtI models vary, most early intervention models are based upon the problem-solving model, standard-treatment protocol model, or a blend of the two (Buffum & Mattos, 2014). As observed in the Mellard et al. (2012) study and confirmed through a multitude of other investigations, the center of any well-implemented RtI framework should be an informed staff trained in problem solving who have a student-centered value system and are committed to using data to identify and assist students who are at-risk. While there are a variety of RtI models which describe the intervention levels differently, most share familiar features across the three tiers (Buffum & Mattos, 2014). Fuchs and Vaughn (2012) supported the prevailing idea that RtI frameworks consist of four mechanisms operating across the three tiers. Fuchs and Vaughn (2012) described a suitable RtI model as including the following: ongoing progress monitoring and data-tracking methods, information sharing concerning research-based best practices for teaching, environments committed to high-quality education, and staff able to put into practice specific interventions.

Literature on RtI illustrates two predominant methods for providing intervention to academically struggling students (Fuchs et al., 2012). Callender (2014) identified two contemporary RtI models as the standard-treatment protocol method and the problem-solving method. Researchers such as Johnson and Mellard (2014) introduced an alternative to the common belief of there being two methods of RtI by pointing out in some schools, there seems to be a combination of the two methods.

Standard-treatment method. The standard-treatment protocol is the traditional version of RtI and describes a program where schools establish detailed procedures for identifying, assessing, and intervening in situations where students are not academically successful. Standard RtI frameworks apply three tiers of intervention, with tier one including universal interventions, tier two including targeted interventions, and tier three including intensive interventions (Callender, 2014). The standard-protocol method provides teachers with the support needed to address academic deficiency in realities where resources are limited and time is scarce (Fuchs et al., 2012). A group of researchers have endorsed the standard-treatment protocol based on the view this framework is consistent and struggling students respond better to structure (Hollenbeck & Patrikakou, 2014). These theorists turn to special education services as an example of how small group settings within defined time periods can support academic development, with the inference being interventions which are structured and systematic are likely to yield positive results (Domitrovich et al., 2008).

A common application of standard-treatment protocol has been assessing the effect interventions have on students' reading abilities (Gitomer & Bell, 2016). Researchers of RtI have pointed out the collaborative team within a school is the critical component of a standard-treatment model (Buffum & Mattos, 2014). Key responsibilities of a collaborative team within an RtI framework include identifying academic deficiencies, planning and implementing interventions, managing those interventions, monitoring academic progress, and evaluating further needs for intervention (Buffum & Mattos, 2014).

Problem-solving model. According to Newton, Horner, Todd, Algozzine, and Algozzine (2012), an RtI program dedicated to a problem-solving model is based upon collaborative teams of educators setting collective goals, making data-based decisions, and being compliant to an evaluative system which systematically marks progress and calls for adjustments. Problem-solving models of RtI serve struggling students at the tier two level through interventions determined by collaborative teams of educators (Hall, 2013). The educators on these teams employ a problem-solving technique based upon assessments of student performance which identify academic skills students are not mastering and illustrate the effectiveness of the interventions applied (Newton et al., 2012). Through the implementation of the problem-solving model of RtI, individualized interventions targeting specific needs can be formed, refined, and made effective (Newton et al., 2012).

According to Callender (2014), instead of standardizing procedures for RtI, schools would instead have the opportunity to adapt to individual needs by using "school-based teams" to identify the difficulties faced by individual students (p. 6). The teams would then, according to Callender (2014), brainstorm specific interventions for individual students, and each student would have his or her own unique plan. The problem-solving approach to RtI, while providing individualized support, tends to be overwhelming due to shortages in time and lack of resources (Fuchs et al., 2012).

While the standard-protocol form of RtI is the predominant version, there remains much debate in academia about whether or not this version of the program provides sufficient intervention (Johnson & Mellard, 2014). According to Johnson & Mellard (2014), there are critical elements to an RtI model regardless of the type of RtI a school

chooses to use. The essential elements include high-quality core classroom instruction, research-based best practices, tiered interventions, universal screening, progress monitoring, and fidelity of intervention (Mellard et al., 2012).

Summary

The scholarly record suggests there is a correlation between group size and the effectiveness of interventions (Johnson & Mellard, 2014). The smaller the group size, the greater the influence of the intervention (Johnson & Mellard, 2014). A review of the scholarly record illustrates RtI programs in urban schools progress monitor in a range of one to three times a week, and interventions are delivered by interventionists besides the classroom teacher (Jimerson, Stein et al., 2016). In the official record, no information has been found to suggest whether these same characteristics exist within rural schools; instead, information suggests application of interventions at a school depends upon the organization's staffing configuration, staff experience, and quantity of professional development (Moran & Petruzzelli, 2013). Slavin (2011), after analyzing a study of cooperative learning and interventions, stated certified teachers tend to be measurably more effective than non-certified staff members at applying interventions and addressing individual academic deficiencies. Who provides the interventions, be they certified or not, has a correlating effect on the interventions' efficacy (Mellard et al., 2012). Slavin (2011) also pointed out not all schools have the resources to provide individualized interventions by means of certified staff (Redding & Walberg, 2012).

Chapter Three: Methodology

This study included examination of factors affecting RtI implementation specific to rural secondary schools. The investigator sought to identify the framework and essential components of RtI found in rural secondary schools. Additionally, the perceptions, attitudes, and insights of administrators and teachers tasked with the implementation of RtI in rural secondary schools were elicited. Data collection consisted of open-ended interviews of key stakeholders and responses from focus group interviews.

Problem and Purpose Overview

Presenting RtI as a framework for addressing academic deficiency, while expecting administrators and educators to implement RtI with efficacy, necessitates research to support the effort (Broxterman & Whalen, 2013). Studies of RtI have predominantly focused on the process and effectiveness of interventions within the context of urban elementary-level school districts (Ahram et al., 2011). Contemporary researchers of RtI's design seem to either assume there are no dissimilarities between urban and rural demographics, or that any such variation has little to no significance (Gourwitz, Slanda, & Martin, 2015). A preponderance of scholarly investigators simply ignore differences and many times solely recognize variables specific to urban elementary schools while disregarding the characteristics of rural secondary schools (Strohmyer, 2010). This investigator sought to understand the implementation of RtI from the perspective of administrators, teachers, and counselors who work in rural secondary schools. Those individuals have to account for the myriad of distinct and unique elements found in each of their school districts, all while supported by insufficient research specific to their reality.

The available research on RtI implementation suggests the primary variations which have measurable effect on RtI programs occur in the following categories:

- multi-tiered instruction,
- assessment and infrastructure,
- leadership, and
- teaming/collaboration (Noltemeyer, Boone, & Sansosti, 2014).

In addition to a shortage of investigations into RtI at the secondary level, the scholarly record restricts the inquiry almost exclusively to urban school districts (Guy et al., 2016). Rural secondary schools are met with many of the same challenges seen in urban schools, yet there are clear differences between the two and characteristics unique to each type of district (Redding & Walberg, 2012). This study will enhance the scholarly record by including these overlooked segments of the educational system.

Research questions. The following questions guided the research:

1. What characteristics of response to intervention do rural secondary-school principals, counselors, and teachers identify as they implement and manage academic intervention?
2. What do rural secondary-school principals, counselors, and teachers report as obstacles of implementing response to intervention?
3. What advantages and disadvantages do rural secondary-school principals, counselors, and teachers report as they implement and manage academic intervention?
4. How has response to intervention implementation affected the roles of rural secondary-school principals, counselors, and teachers?

5. What are the components of response to intervention programs in rural secondary schools?

Research Design

Qualitative methodology, specifically a constructivist design in grounded theory, offers an investigator opportunities to address and potentially answer research questions which are less statistical and more holistic (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). A qualitative approach emphasizes entities, processes, and meanings that are not experimentally examined or measured in terms of quantity, amount, intensity, or frequency (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Qualitative research refers to meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, symbols, and descriptions (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). For this study, gaining insight into the perceptions of those implementing and operationalizing RtI programs in rural high schools provided the opportunity to enhance the scholastic record. Disseminating the information gathered allows for advancement of intervention-based strategies in schools with similar characteristics and serves as a constructive tool for those managing intervention programs (Creswell, 2014).

Creswell (2014) commented on qualitative research by saying, "[It] is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 32). While quantitative research generally focuses on describing trends or explaining relationships among variables, qualitative research allows researchers to explore topics where there is little known (Creswell, 2014). For example, Hollenbeck (2007) stated, "The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) suggests applications of RtI without stipulating specifics of the construct, giving researchers and practitioners the freedom to develop unique RtI implementations" (p.

137). This level of discretion suggests programs are as unique as the schools in which they reside, whether they are urban, rural, big, small, affluent, or impoverished. Therefore, the objective of this qualitative dissertation was to describe the commonalities observed within RtI frameworks of schools classified as being both rural and secondary-level. Gaining details about RtI programs and how they are implemented and managed has the potential to assist teachers and administrators in their efforts.

This descriptive study included interviews of administrators, teachers, and counselors tasked with the implementation and management of RtI in rural schools of southwest Missouri. Robinson et al. (2013) indicated individual interviews should demonstrate to participants that their efforts are valued and worth attention, support, and assistance. A cross-sectional research analysis was utilized to collect data from those who were interviewed. Unlike longitudinal studies, cross-sectional analyses are effective at determining the frequency of responses and have the capacity to reveal associations among factors (O'Connor et al., 2013). The cross-sectional method allows for comparison of different variables while providing opportunity to recognize the existence and degree of contributing factors (Brannen, 2017).

The factors this study was designed to investigate include the following: (a) describing the implementation of intervention programs akin to RtI within assorted rural secondary schools; (b) noting observed characteristics of communication, leadership, and proficiency; (c) documenting the effect of resource allocation (in the form of professional development, time, and finances) on RtI-like programs; and (d) understanding the procedures which facilitate the implementation and management of RtI within rural secondary schools (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). A cross-sectional analysis provided the

ability to collect information describing implementation levels of RtI from a statistically significant number of individuals in a reasonable period of time (Lee, 2012). The use of focus interviews for gathering information from teachers, counselors, and building leaders provided data on their perceptions of RtI programs within their respective schools. Interviews also provided insight into characteristics, both positive and negative, of RtI programs in rural high schools. This knowledge could be useful to teachers and administrators tasked with implementing and managing RtI programs in comparable schools.

Population and Sample

This study was designed to examine the implementation and operationalization of RtI in rural secondary schools. Therefore, the intention was to identify key stakeholders and establish focus groups consisting of those managing RtI in each rural school. The key participants were anticipated to be the principal, counselor, and teachers.

Rural schools, as defined by the U.S. Department of Education and the Bureau of the Census, exist in communities with a population of fewer than 2,500 people (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). In 2006, there was further refinement of the definition for rural schools to a classification of those schools eligible to participate in the Small Rural School Achievement (SRSA) program (Stelmach, 2011). As of 2013, 46.7% of Missouri's public school students attended rural schools (Snyder & Dillow, 2013). Sullivan (2000) cited additional, relevant characteristics of rural schools. In comparison to their urban counterparts, rural schools are smaller in enrollment, have fewer fiscal resources, have fewer minority students, and tend to have a smaller variety of intervention-oriented programs (Sullivan, 2000).

Because Missouri is not one of the 12 states which fully, or even partially, mandate RtI, it was recognized there are no standardized frameworks of RtI for the schools examined (Zirkel & Thomas, 2010). In fact, it was discovered a significant number of rural secondary schools have RtI programs in place which are completely dissimilar. In some instances, the information gathered was irrelevant to the study.

Instrumentation

This study involved cross-sectional, standardized, open-ended interviews. Interviews were conducted with educators, administrators, and counselors working in rural secondary schools who were managing RtI programs. Interview questions consisted of those adapted by the researcher from Pennsylvania's Response to Instruction and Intervention (RtI) Readiness and Implementation Self-Assessment Tool (Bean & Lillenstein, 2012). The original self-assessment tool addresses 10 indicators of a school's RtI implementation level (Marston et al., 2011). The modified instrument used in this study included interview questions focused on eliciting (a) descriptions of RtI programs, (b) understandings of those managing the programs, (c) commonalities hindering and helping implementation, and (d) proof of the existence of the four standard components of RtI. The four standard components included the following:

- multi-tiered instruction,
- assessment and infrastructure,
- leadership, and
- teaming/collaboration (Noltemeyer et al., 2014).

Data Collection

Upon receiving Institutional Review Board approval from Lindenwood University (see Appendix A), an email explaining the purpose, rationale, and methodology of this study was sent to administrators of rural schools in southwest Missouri. This communication included a recruitment letter (see Appendix B) inviting administrators to participate in interviews and to identify staff members, both teachers and counselors involved in secondary-level RtI, who would be willing to participate in this study. These administrators were asked to review the informed consent (see Appendix C) and forward the communication to those on staff members actively involved in implementation and management of RtI. An attachment linking readers to an electronic version of the interview questions was included in this email (see Appendix D).

Interviews of administrators, teachers, and counselors generated the data for this study. Respondents consisted of southwest Missouri high school administrators, teachers, and counselors working in rural school districts. The rural secondary schools included in the study were determined by creating a variation sample of a stratified cross-section of rural school districts in southwest Missouri with grades 9-12 in their organizations. Participants were selected from each of these districts by means of a purposive homogenous sample, where those interviewed share the same traits or characteristics; in this instance, occupation and background were shared (Lund, 2012).

Creswell (2014) defined focus groups typically to include four to six individuals. For this study, the first focus group consisted of teachers from a cross-section of rural southwest Missouri high schools. The second focus group consisted of high school principals, and the third focus group consisted of high school counselors from a cross-

section of rural southwest Missouri high schools. Interviewees were given the opportunity to respond to scripted questions, which elicited descriptive data regarding the implementation and operationalization of RtI in Missouri's rural secondary schools. Data generated from interviews revealed the perceptions of each group regarding RtI implementation and management, difficulties and obstacles of RtI implementation, and how RtI implementation affects the roles of rural secondary teachers, counselors, and principals. The perceptions were analyzed and recorded, creating a clearer depiction of the implementation of RtI in rural Missouri schools.

Data Analysis

Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2013) asserted the data gleaned from qualitative research are "well grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of human processes" (p. 4). In this study, data were in the form of words. These data were collected from interviews, comments, observations, and a review of the scholarly record. Such data require a degree of processing to become useful (Miles et al., 2013).

Because qualitative data tend to hide significant complexity, it is advisable to follow the tenets of prominent scholars in the field of qualitative inquiry who suggest competent research follows a specific process organized on three parallel constructs: data condensation, data display, and drawing and verifying conclusions (Miles et al., 2013). Hall (2013) explained the descriptive qualitative method "often involves extensive observation and note-taking, as well as in-depth narrative" (p. 1). Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2012) also supported the use of qualitative research when interviews result in a large amount of data to analyze, as it provides a clear picture for a topic. Creswell (2012) described the qualitative approach as that which prompts the researcher into "making

interpretations of the meaning of the data" (p. 32). It is this analysis which allows researchers to decide into which categories, or themes, the data fit (Creswell, 2012). It also is why qualitative research is not limited to one approach and may differ from one observer to the next (Creswell, 2012).

The resulting information, acquired through focus group interviews, was assembled, categorized, analyzed, and interpreted following an adapted version of the Constant Comparative Method (Skelding-Dills, 2013). This process was introduced by Maykut and Morehouse in 1994. First, the researcher collects the data, in this study through interviews (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). Once interviews are concluded, the task of collecting and organizing notes and transcripts commences (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). This gives a researcher the opportunity to focus his or her inquiry (Skelding-Dills, 2013). During this part of the inquiry, a researcher takes the interview notes and writes them out into full narratives, thus allowing for a more in-depth consideration of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017). According to Creswell (2012), themes and codes should emerge in the data, thus offering an opportunity for labeling the information.

Ethical Considerations

A concerted effort was made to assure this study remained credible, systematic, and beneficial (Rossman & Rallis, 2011). In regard to ethical considerations, prominent scholars in the field of qualitative inquiry were consulted. Experts like Creswell (2014) advised researchers to communicate to all participants the commitment to preserve confidentiality. The participants were apprised of the study's purpose and what role the

researcher was performing (Creswell, 2014). In practice, focus group participants' names were replaced with numbers to maintain anonymity (Creswell, 2014).

According to Yin (2015), bias in research is anything that produces unsuspected, systematic variation in the research. A researcher's opinions and insights could alter the results of the study (Creswell, 2014). However, Creswell (2012) maintained using focus group interviews assuages such influence, provided the researcher's role is that of a questioner and recorder only (Creswell, 2014). Rossman and Rallis (2011) characterized researchers as those who create new understanding for particular topics. Skelding-Dills (2013) wrote, "Researchers are learners; they have assumptions; and these assumptions shape how they go about doing their project" (p. 44).

The researcher in a qualitative study is tasked with the responsibility of maintaining the integrity of the data while at the same time being its principal collector and the one who transcribes all that is discovered (Skelding-Dills, 2013). Skelding-Dills (2013) further pointed out it is important researchers understand they have a "worldview" which directly influences their "lens" and the way in which they see and interpret data (p. 44). In qualitative research, the investigator must understand this built-in bias and must have a strong understanding of qualitative skills such as "seeing, listening, reading, and making sense of their perceptions" to mitigate the effect of their predispositions (Rossman & Rallis, 2011, p. 34).

Summary

This researcher employed a qualitative method to investigate and describe the implementation and operationalization of RtI in rural high schools by means of a descriptive study focused on subject interviews. Interviews allowed teachers,

administrators, and counselors to describe their experiences implementing and operationalizing RtI programs within rural secondary schools. Responses were analyzed and documented, creating a clearer image of the implementation of RtI in rural secondary-level schools. Information garnered from interviews detailed the experiences and perceptions of those directly involved in the implementation and operationalization of RtI in rural secondary schools.

Chapter Four: Analysis of Data

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to add to the limited body of research concerning the implementation, operationalization, and improvement of response to intervention in rural secondary schools. The intent was to describe intervention-based programs in those schools, identify any difficulties and obstacles, and illustrate how the implementation of RtI has affected the roles of rural secondary teachers, counselors, and principals. A qualitative approach was utilized in this study and was accomplished by disclosing the narrative gathered from interviews of teachers, counselors, and administrators. The research approach provides a real-world description of RtI frameworks, policy, and procedures within the context of rural secondary schools, thus furthering understanding of academic intervention frameworks within a rarely investigated context.

Process

Data gathering was accomplished through interviews. Interviews were completed with a purposive sample of 12 administrators, teachers, and counselors employed in six rural high schools in southwest Missouri. All respondents were employed at the secondary level and worked in rural schools. Data collection took place from December 10, 2016, to March 24, 2017.

The sample was determined using the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's (MODESE) classification of rural. Those criteria are as follows:

- To exist in areas with population less than 5,000;
- To have a total average daily attendance (ADA) of less than 600 students, or serve only in counties having a population density of fewer than 10 persons per

square mile (Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MODESE], 2015).

Participating schools had been implementing a tiered intervention program in academics for differing periods of time (ranging from one to 10 years). Demographic controls were implemented in an attempt to focus the investigation on a particular area of interest, while mitigating the effect of other outside variables.

Narrowing the examination to rural secondary schools was this researcher's attempt to fill a void in academia regarding RtI implementation and efficacy. Additionally, investigating rural secondary schools allowed for the examination of a number of distinct factors affecting teachers, counselors, and administrators as they experience change when tasked with implementing RtI. Those related factors included organizational structure, resource availability, existing school culture, and the community political situation (Benjamin, 2011).

Participants were interviewed in an effort to have them describe their experiences implementing and managing RtI programs within the context of their rural secondary schools. Qualifications for candidates included serving as an administrator, teacher, or counselor in a rural secondary school where an intervention program for addressing academic deficiency was in place. The rural secondary schools in which participants worked represented a variety of RtI implementation methods and styles. Responses to the interview questions provided rich, descriptive data regarding RtI in southwest Missouri's rural secondary schools.

Responses were grouped into categories based on the themes and commonalities which emerged from the interviews. This effort to minimize the number of response

categories guided the search for participants. Similarities in variables such as geography, social demographics, student enrollment, facilities, supports, and assessed valuation influenced which schools were contacted. Despite these controls, interviews with administrators, counselors, and teachers revealed noticeable differences.

The research questions were the foundation for the development of interview questions, and responses led to transcript analysis. During the interviews, in addition to gaining information on RtI frameworks and procedures, the researcher acquired basic information such as total years of service, time worked in districts, professional history, and training specific to RtI. This basic information also included insight into the participants' experiences with implementation of RtI within the context of their schools. Participants provided thoughts on teaching in an RtI environment, including specific pedagogical methods, types of interventions, and collection and dissemination of data. An analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted to address the research questions.

Participants for this study were interviewed individually, some in person and others by phone. Interviews lasted an average of 50 to 60 minutes. All interviews were conducted using the same format, and recordings were transcribed. From the transcriptions, themes were identified and coded. Notes taken during the interviews provided context and revealed the emergent themes. Analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted with the aid of a coding system with which the researcher categorized participant responses into nascent themes. This was accomplished by systematically going through all the transcripts and notes and categorizing the information to a set of emergent codes.

The interviews, and consequential analyses, led to the development of particular categories. The identified categories are as follows:

- Describing RtI as it exists in particular schools;
- Identifying difficulties and obstacles to management of RtI;
- Describing how RtI implementation has affected the roles of rural secondary teachers, counselors, and principals; and
- Identifying elements which promote application of RtI with fidelity in rural secondary schools.

Pre-set themes included the following: (a) staff understanding of RtI terminology and procedures, (b) knowledge of RtI progress monitoring, and (c) support for RtI programs. The emergent themes were generated from the transcripts. Emergent themes included the following: (a) roles and responsibilities for implementation of RtI, (b) the influence of management and accountability on RtI effectiveness, (c) barriers and solutions to RtI in rural secondary schools, and (d) variations of RtI-type programs in rural secondary schools. In order to properly describe contrasting applications of RtI in rural secondary schools, it became of interest to determine which model of RtI (standard-treatment or problem-solving) was most prevalent in these schools.

After data were gathered, all the notes were examined. During this examination stage, observational data were sorted and organized using the coding method to refine the interpretation and increase further understanding. Since this was a qualitative study, data comparisons were conducted to generate nascent themes and to develop a description of RtI within rural secondary schools. Participant responses, direct quotes, and paraphrases were used to diminish any researcher subjectivity or bias. All data collected were

securely stored and labeled using Roman numeral classifications to ensure the anonymity of all participants. Data will be destroyed three years after the completion of this study.

The results of this study include what respondents described as the essential components of RtI, the barriers to RtI, how implementation of RtI has affected their roles, and what they have done to advance the RtI initiative in their schools. Coding respondent information focused this investigation toward examining three principal topics. Interview responses provided two distinctive categories of information: expected and emergent. Varying descriptions of the basic components of RtI were expected. The challenges of managing an RtI program with fidelity and program impact on staff roles were emergent. The descriptions of fidelity within RtI programs were developed from respondent transcripts and thus became emergent.

Interpretations

Examination of respondent descriptions of experiences was straightforward and accomplished using a descriptive technique. This part of the investigation focused on specific issues respondents identified with RtI programs in their schools. These issues included lack of staff proficiency, inconsistencies in data-based decision making, minimal staff buy-in, resistance to change, shortages of resources (specifically time and funds), and low administrative efficacy. Examination of program fidelity involved comparing and contrasting the RtI programs in rural secondary schools, as described by respondents, with the standardized and problem-solving models widely described in the scholarly record. The third part of the inquiry detailed specific actions taken by respondents to overcome operational problems and to support efforts to enhance RtI programs.

The first research question of this study was designed to explore respondent proficiency with RtI as a program. Administrators, counselors, and teachers from rural secondary schools identified traits of RtI. The objective was to ascertain the familiarity of respondents with the essential components of RtI, as having a firm understanding of RtI's essential components suggests implementation and management with a higher degree of fidelity.

The second research question was designed to explore what rural secondary principals, teachers, and counselors report as obstacles to implementing academic intervention programs in their schools. The aim of this research question was to explore the difficulties and obstacles of RtI implementation from the perspective of those working in rural secondary schools and then to explore the academic record to see what those working in urban elementary schools said in response to the same inquiries. The intention was to confirm whether context is, or is not, a factor in the implementation and management of RtI.

The third research question was designed to further the narrative on RtI's application in rural secondary schools by having respondents describe the advantages and disadvantages of implementing RtI in their schools. The supposition of this research question was that administrators, counselors, and teachers would report similar advantages and disadvantages, allowing for a balanced description of RtI from a first-person perspective. Interview questions elicited how RtI implementation has affected the administrators, teachers, and counselors undertaking the task. Respondents were also asked to detail the realization of academic interventions. Inconsistencies emerged as

respondents from all three focus groups consistently focused their responses upon disadvantages and provided little insight into advantages of RtI.

The fourth research question was designed to elicit perceptions of how RtI implementation and management have affected the roles of respondents. Establishing such an understanding allows for a description in variations among RtI frameworks in rural secondary schools. The final research question was designed to determine how participants describe their specific RtI programs. Responses allowed for further understanding of individual programs, the proficiency levels of those implementing RtI, and differences or similarities among RtI programs.

Essential Components

In response to the interview questions (see Appendix B), respondents detailed the essential components of RtI with notable similarities and differences. Respondents from all three focus groups identified the essential components of RtI by describing a framework consisting of a tiered process. The tiered process included procedures for identifying struggling learners, various approaches for determining the interventions to use, and some form of progress monitoring. Further analysis of the responses revealed notable variations. Teachers, for example, provided more variation among themselves than did administrators and counselors. Some teachers gave detailed descriptions of RtI's essential components, while others provided little to no detail.

Administrator and counselor responses were more internally consistent, suggesting they have more operational understanding of RtI. Respondent O, an administrator, was representative of most administrators and counselors when responding to the question about essential components and inner workings of RtI programs. He

described components of RtI in detail by dialoging about the three tiers. He described the tiers as "classifications" for students based upon academic performance and explained how students are categorized into tiers using identifiers such as grades and teacher recommendations. His description of progress monitoring included explanation of a process which follows a rigid timeline and is dependent upon the collection of specific data, like student grades.

As mentioned, teachers' responses tended to be less detailed and to have greater variation when compared with other teachers. Some described the essential components of RtI, but went no further in breaking down what those components consisted of, or of the roles they as teachers played in the RtI programs in their schools. Teachers responded using nomenclature reflecting their role as implementers. Many focused their responses on identification and interventions; however, few spoke of progress monitoring. While administrators and counselors brought up progress monitoring as an instrument for measurement consisting of specific data-gathering pieces, most teachers described progress monitoring as something someone else did.

There was perceptible variation in detail and complexity in responses from all three focus groups when comparing responses from one school to another. There was also differentiation in the transcripts among teachers, administrators, and counselors when asked to detail the essential components of RtI. It was readily apparent those working in the same school provided similar responses, but when comparing responses from school to school, descriptions of RtI's essential components varied in detail and complexity. This could suggest respondents in some schools, because they have a greater degree of understanding, have greater proficiency in the implementation and management

of RtI programs. This could suggest RtI programs have noticeable differences in constitution, application, and effectiveness from one rural secondary school to another.

Describing Implementation and Management

Responses to interview questions linked to the second research question indicated obstacles to the implementation of RtI programs. Responses revealed congruence in how counselors and teachers responded, while administrators' responses were dissimilar from both the other two focus groups and among themselves. Teachers and counselors drew attention to notable inadequacies in terms of staff level of understanding about academic intervention procedures and terminology. Administrator responses tended not to include such a perspective. Administrators were inclined to describe RtI programs positively, while counselors and teachers were predominantly negative about RtI programs in their schools.

While describing the implementation and operation of RtI programs in their buildings, teachers and counselors described a lack of staff familiarity with standardized RtI components and procedures. A related interview question asked about challenges and obstacles to managing RtI programs. To this, teachers and counselors described lack of resources, inadequate training, overburdening of some staff members, and challenges with buy-in and resistance to change. This could suggest RtI programs in rural secondary schools are very similar in their application and results. Teachers and counselors were unenthusiastic and described burdens, while administrators were more upbeat and procedural.

When asked to describe how RtI implementation has affected the roles of rural secondary teachers, counselors, and principals and to identify elements which promote

fidelity of application, respondents from all three focus groups described interrelated problems and opportunities with program management. Responses were similar in groups but dissimilar in individual evaluation. Noticeable disparities were revealed among individual respondents when taking into account who came from which schools. Programs were reported to vary in composition and implementation from one school to another.

Respondents, particularly teachers, described problems they identified as stemming from a lack of general buy-in and from having limited staffing for all the roles and tasks required to implement and oversee an RtI program. Several respondents from the teacher and counselor focus groups described a lack of general knowledge of RtI management. Some identified this deficiency in their colleagues and some expressed this as their own shortcoming. They identified inadequate program introduction, deficiencies in training, and insufficient support resulting in disparate effort among staff members. These dynamics, according to respondents, contributed to operational dysfunction of RtI programs in their schools.

Some teachers and counselors depicted having to cope with situations stemming from other staff members who either inexpertly participate, minimally take part, or decide outright not to participate in their school's RtI initiative. Respondents spoke frequently about fellow staff members' deficiencies with data collection procedures, lack of progress monitoring, lack of staff involvement, and overall lack of staff proficiency. Recurrent causes of these deficiencies, according to multiple respondents, were identified as follows: (a) insufficient delegation of responsibilities during the introduction of RtI, (b)

lack of regular follow-up, (c) overwhelming staff with more responsibility, (d) and lacking systematic retraining and accountability for RtI.

All three groups of respondents, when questioned about the difficulties of managing RtI in rural secondary schools, talked of being overloaded with numerous roles within the process, in large part because of having to assume roles left unfulfilled by others. Subject M, a counselor, explained her role as the primary RtI contact for teachers in her school. She explained having the responsibility to train new staff on her school's intervention procedures while also having to deal with program "illiteracy." Subject M inferred the lack of program understanding is "seemingly self-imposed." She listed reasons for improper application of RtI directly related to the culture and climate in her school. Her district is one which does a "good job" identifying students who require special assistance early in the elementary grades. As a result, few students get to the secondary level who have not yet been identified as needing special services. This, in combination with a climate in the secondary school resistant to change, contributes to apathy among staff members.

Such a dynamic was also affirmed in Subject M's school where staff members reported limited buy-in. Some even "distance" themselves from any newly introduced program, while others improperly apply the program. This results in an overall "program dysfunction." Subject M detailed having to take on more responsibility for her school's RtI program because of "staff apathy" toward the procedures, which in turn, negatively affects the outcomes. She described this as being a "cycle" which leads to "overloading" those who are invested in the RtI program at her school.

Specific roles identified by the respondents included the following: (a) member of the school's RtI team, (b) implementer, (c) trainer, (d) primary data collector, (e) RtI coordinator, (f) program evaluator, (g) handler of objections or complaints, and (h) leader responsible for program fidelity. Those interviewed identified as a difficulty the variety and number of roles for which individuals are responsible. Specific responders identified their most important role is to identify students who are in academic need and then to coordinate what interventions best serve the needs of those students.

Subject F, a counselor, identified the multiple roles she is tasked with as being her "greatest challenge" of implementing RtI in her school. In the transcript, she highlighted the number of different duties she faces, including that of RtI coordinator. Her response, similar to the responses from Subjects A and M, emphasized difficulties related to consistent use and administration of RtI. One difficulty these participants identified was a lack of follow-up, especially in the form of retraining. Subject F spoke of a need to delegate and define responsibilities among staff members. Otherwise, the program would "degrade" and "increasingly become the responsibility of a few and not of all."

Subject F stated her school initially made great strides in addressing both academic and behavioral problems by implementing intervention-based strategies. During that phase of RtI, roles were "clearly assigned and defined." However, over time, Subject F identified several factors which contributed to her and others having to take on more responsibility in the program. Her responses pointed out a lack of retraining, staff and administrative turnover, and even some staff who "separated themselves from the intervention program" by lessening participation or even ceasing to participate. These factors, according to her, placed increasing responsibility on fewer staff members. In her

case, Subject F stated in her primary role as the RtI coordinator, she "felt overwhelmed and unsupported" because she was also having to take on responsibilities for several other roles.

Subject D, an administrator, was another of the several respondents who highlighted the many roles taken on by a limited number of staff as one of the primary difficulties in implementing and managing the academic intervention program at his school. In every one of the responses from Subject D, he touched on all four of the research questions. For example, while analyzing data on the first research question, Subject D described his several roles and then expanded his statement by identifying those roles as a difficulty. Specifically, Subject D brought up the challenges faced when promoting professional development within his district, where there is a tradition of applying resources on a "district-wide scale" only. He stated this culture led to a "generic approach" when introducing programs and conducting subsequent professional development.

Subject D discussed the introduction of an intervention-based strategy to address academically failing students, emphasizing that all staff in the district receive the same training at the same time. His critique was twofold. First, the high school staff received the same overview as all the other staff and so had limited understanding of academic intervention strategies pertaining to high school students. This resulted in professional development on a program which was not "fully applicable to the environment he and his staff work in." Secondly, the context and application issue then became a chief factor in the academic intervention program becoming "steadily dysfunctional" and thus causing Subject D to take steps to reduce that dysfunction. He described this problem as an

ongoing issue. In his words, the "generic approach to implementation gave those who always resist change the opportunity to make a case for doubt in response to intervention's effectiveness," particularly in the high school.

Subject D reported a few staff members in his building openly opposed an RtI program because they did not think it was applicable at the high school level. This lack of "buy in," according to another administrator, Subject K, meant RtI suffered less efficacy because not everyone was "on-board." He stated this led to more burdens as the intervention-based program was realized. Both respondents (Participants D and K) expressed their disapproval at having to serve in several operational roles normally filled by teachers while also having to "frequently back up and address the naysayers." Subject K furthered this topic by pointing out dissenting staff members indirectly promoted criticisms from stakeholders and parents, which increased his workload even further.

Respondents often mentioned limited staff understanding as a contributing factor to problems with implementing and then operating an RtI program in their schools. Respondents frequently identified the problem of staff members lacking understanding of evidence-based processes and how this is important to decision making. Misunderstandings and lack of skill have the potential to negatively impact program fidelity. While none of the respondents used the term "fidelity," they defined the concept as being impaired by staff unfamiliarity with data-based decision making, which then negatively affected other RtI processes.

Subject J, a classroom teacher, described an RtI program which was not well-implemented because of staff members who were "response to intervention illiterate." Subject J described the RtI program in her school as the primary tool for universal

screening and progress monitoring of academic performance; however, she described the intervention program in her high school as "lacking effectiveness." She pointed out inexperienced staff members had adverse effects on RtI, specifically in their lack of evidenced-based protocols and adherence to basic tenets like data monitoring. She included information about witnessing staff members developing and applying interventions which were not evidence-based. Additionally, those staff members did not develop or maintain consistent or relevant data collection procedures. Subject J pointed out this inadequacy was more readily seen in tiers one and two of the RtI program.

Subject J indicated two reasons for lack of RtI knowledge among staff. First, training in her district lacked specificity and follow-up. Second, she pointed out secondary schools usually do not have core programs like those found in elementary schools. She described the reading program used in her district as having fundamental intervention strategies at its core. It is evidence-based, incorporates a universal model for data collection and decision making, is scientifically rooted, and there is a firm expectation teachers will use the reading program in strict observance to its protocols. Subject J suggested having such a program serves as a model and promotes consistency among staff. She described her district as not having such a focal point at the secondary level. She indicated, as a result, secondary-level pedagogy in her district is founded more on teacher "self-sufficiency." Her assertion was a program like RtI is challenging at the secondary level because of this culture of autonomy.

Another of the difficulties with an operational RtI program in rural secondary schools involved time and was consistently mentioned by all three focus groups. Respondents described time as a resource and commented regularly on how RtI programs

require a lot of it. Subject H, a counselor, answered the interview questions and referred to the issue of time in almost all of her responses. She stressed the "good faith efforts" she and other staff make to implement an RtI program in their school, but the time needed to "collect data, make tier placement decisions, work with teachers on teaching strategies and accommodations, document, and follow-up was enormous." She described her school as being better-prepared than most, because her position is in support of the head counselor. Being directly tasked with serving as the coordinator of RtI in her building was not as overwhelming as in other schools where there is only one counselor. This is pertinent because Subject H was the only respondent of those solicited to participate in this study who worked in a rural secondary school with more than one counselor. She went on to point out the considerable need for time leads to inconstancies she then has to resolve.

Subject B, an administrator, corroborated Subject H's point with specifics on the investment of time. She stated:

> During the processing of a student identified as needing intervention, a teacher will spend up to an hour to analyze the data, confer with the coordinator and administrator, develop an accommodations strategy, establish and conduct progress monitoring, and fill out all the documentation. And that is for one case.

Subject B then described the process as "more difficult for teachers in rural schools," due to a combination of "fewer resources and having a higher number of students who are in need of academic intervention." She supported this statement by reporting that in her school, the number of students ranked in the lower percentile on benchmark assessments has increased in the years she has been the administrator.

Subject A, a classroom teacher, identified lack of fidelity. She stated the RtI program at her school, while incorporating a data-based method for identifying need and applying interventions, lacks consistency with that data-based method. She illustrated this point by stating teachers are not using the same data indicators to identify need or to measure progress. She pointed out that after the initial introduction of RtI, including formal training of staff, the program in her school included little collaboration time or facilitated teacher collaboration. She identified this as a deficiency and reported it contributed to inconsistent identification of struggling learners, dissimilar tiered interventions, and mixed results for academic recovery. In fact, Subject A's description of results from academic interventions in her school was mostly "ambiguous."

Subject A made several suggestions of ways to improve academic interventions in her school. She would like to see the RtI program integrate a co-teaching process. She pointed out that co-teaching facilitates the acceptance of change and would "help promote a communal understanding of the response to intervention process." Such standardization in programs has been widely identified as having occurred in urban elementary settings (Moreno, 2015). Interestingly, respondents in this study suggested RtI programs in rural secondary schools share drawbacks but vary both in their format and function.

Among the respondents in the three focus groups, some indicated the academic intervention programs in their rural secondary schools were functioning well. There were few overwhelmingly positive depictions. These respondents gave evidence of structured and readily available professional development resources. They also noted the availability of research-based resources and materials. Most notable was the description

of cultures which place high value on data-based decision making. This characteristic, above all others, was mentioned by those who described effective academic intervention programs in their rural secondary schools.

Subject T, a teacher, described the "data-driven philosophy" existing within his school as a way of "seeing students from a completely different angle." He stated having this perspective makes decisions "more clinical," which works well at "keeping everyone on the same page." Subject T pointed out other factors which support the view of an RtI program functioning effectively. While he described a program similar to those described by other respondents (data-based, integrating progress monitoring, and applying interventions in tiers), he also detailed characteristics identified by other respondents as impediments. Specifically, the intervention program Subject T described lacked follow-up professional development funds. He described shortages of "educational resources" and pointed out teachers at his school are "still developing universal screening procedures," and "a consistent approach to progress monitoring is a work in progress." He also described resistance to change as a factor which influences the intervention program in his building. His response to all these challenges centered on the cultural characteristics described above – his school's long-adopted data-based approach to problem solving and having universal expectations frequently reinforced.

Most respondents, after describing their difficulties with RtI, indicated the process benefits students. These participants tended to use descriptors like "important" and "helpful" when describing the RtI processes in their schools. A teacher, Subject C, while describing the process as "time consuming" and "overly dependent on paperwork," pointed out the intervention program in her school has "created a problem-solving

approach to all issues in her building." She went on to say, "Our response to intervention program has changed how we look at student academic performance. We used to look at the class performance and now we pay more attention to individual performance." Another teacher, Subject E, shared similar comments when he described how the RtI program in his building "has helped teachers problem solve why some students are underperforming." He reported he and his colleagues "collaborate, use data, and observe student progress so much more than ever before."

An administrator, Subject S, also shared RtI has fostered a more collaborative philosophy. He pointed out he has had more conversations about specific students than before his school implemented an RtI program. He also stated regular education and special teachers collaborate more, and he credited RtI with increasing the frequency of parent contact. Subject S commented the nature of parent contact has also changed because of the RtI program. He described this as a "major success." He pronounced parent-teacher conversations as "more focused on academic performance, were specific in identifying a student's strengths and weaknesses, and fostered resolutions which favored the student."

Respondents, while providing their critiques on RtI in rural secondary schools, tended to provide solutions to implementing an intervention-based program effectively. Several participants pointed out the value of a well-defined professional development plan. Subject D emphasized the need to specialize RtI training to take into account the unique environments within districts. In his words, "While the foundational principles of academic interventions are similar for all grades, application in first grade and application in 11th grade are completely different things." Subject F, along with several other

respondents, made suggestions for improvement which highlight the difficulties with RtI programs in schools with limited resources.

Calling attention to these corrections can also explain why the issue of maintaining various roles in RtI was such a widely identified problem among all respondent groups. Common solutions to the issue of individuals having too many roles included incorporating a regular schedule for retraining, meeting the need for enforcement of expectations, promoting the idea of delegation, and clearly defining roles for individuals and not just groups. Subject F described this as "having a detailed job description on who does what in the response to intervention program" and then supervising those who serve in the roles. He also stressed the need to have scheduled collaboration time while pointing out there is little time during the school day for teachers to collaborate with each other, with counselors, and particularly with administrators. Subject F stated managing the time to collaborate is the "most important part of managing a workable response to intervention program." He supported this by saying teacher buy-in would be improved if they did not "constantly feel overburdened."

Advantages and Disadvantages

Although an effort was made to address advantages and disadvantages of academic intervention programs, advantages were not revealed in the responses of most participants. Many of the respondents, from all three focus groups, indicated RtI in their schools was initially introduced with adequate training, but after initial implementation, the training component decreased in both frequency and availability. According to several respondents, this contributed to a "disjointed implementation process" and made the whole initiative appear to be exclusively "top-down." Such a pattern made

implementation of RtI difficult and led to problems overcoming resistance to change and creating buy-in. This dynamic was described in the scholastic record and is found at all grade levels and all socioeconomic levels.

The state's recommendation for RtI implementation is to deploy the program incrementally while maintaining strong support from administration (Gamm et al., 2012). This makes it clear that professional development, particularly during the initial implementation of a program, is important. It also indicates the importance of consistent leadership. Respondents indicated training resources offered through standardized organizations have been valuable. The Southwest Regional Professional Development Center was referenced as an example of a standardized organization that provided exceptional training support for RtI implementation and management.

Subject H referred to school-to-school collaboration as a method used in her district when first introducing RtI. She stated this collaboration created buy-in, because "touring other schools and talking to colleagues helped us from making the same mistakes they made and provided us with insights to what works at their high school." Respondents, particularly administrators and counselors, indicated school-to-school collaboration places an emphasis on rural school districts with an effective and ongoing training program. Subject K stated, "The success of any initiative is dependent upon how good the training is and how committed the staff are."

A teacher, Subject V, stated she "…hoped we will get more staff development on identifying effective interventions, in identifying needs, choosing goals, and measuring how interventions meet the goals." She discussed the need to "understand evidence-based instruction." Subject V also gave some insight into supporting staff development

in rural schools when mentioning the unique challenges they face (e.g., less funding, difficulties with online connectivity, student access, etc.). Her ideas for improvement included supplementing professional development with online resources and including collaborative workshops and courses.

While describing the characteristics of a successful RtI program, respondents were united in their views about what types of leadership best support the initiative. In some of the schools, the principal was described as the person who played the central role and held the primary responsibilities. In other schools, program management was the responsibility of an appointed "problem-solving team." This collection of teachers, counselors, and administrators had equal authority in managing the program. According to the respondents, this collaborative RtI management was preferred. A collaborative management style "improve[s] buy-in and spread[s] the responsibility load."

Many respondents voiced frustration with lack of consistency in leadership. Transcripts indicated the root cause of inconsistency can be attributed to the frequent turnover of building administrators and superintendents. The turnover factor was referenced by respondents as something which directly, and negatively, affected the fidelity of programs, including RtI. Fidelity within any program is a measure of whether that program is being carried out as intended. In RtI, fidelity is essential for both identifying struggling students and assessing the results of interventions.

When focusing on fidelity, there was an observable difference among the three focal groups. Respondents, specifically administrators, in reference to ensuring fidelity, promoted having staff members who are "…star teachers with the experience to be in-house trainers." Teachers and counselors, in reference to ensuring fidelity, promoted a

coaching concept in which administrators define roles, observe proof of expectations, provide follow-up training, and enforce expectations.

Respondents from all three focus groups cited the importance of resource support and urged for more time to be allocated to RtI programs. Considering resources, respondents described a need to increase staffing by providing support personnel and screening new hires for their knowledge on intervention-based strategies. An administrator, Subject K, made comments on the issue of resources and management of personnel, stating, "Staffing is honestly the most important resource… Asking already stretched teachers to further differentiate their classes into three tiers is hard." He further described the difficulties of securing adequately trained teachers, while also having a budget sufficient enough to support the material and training needs of staff. According to Subject K:

> It is commonly knowledge that many rural schools face difficulty hiring and retaining highly qualified personnel. This is a circumstance resulting from differences in pay, benefits, services, and other causes. Being able to retain an excellent teacher, who you have invested heavily in, makes programs like response to intervention doable.

Respondents also discussed resources from the perspective of funding. They did so primarily by referencing funding allocation and emphasizing funding scarcity. According to Subject D, "Allocation of funds for training is hard-pressed to meet the needs of district initiatives and mandates." From his perspective, "Once a program like response to intervention is put into effect, spending tends to get reallocated to the next

program in the pipeline." In rural schools, this could suggest there is little to no financial support for operational programs. Other respondents made similar statements.

Subject M, the RtI coordinator for her school, spoke on sustaining an RtI program in rural schools as "fine the first year when there is support and then increasingly difficult after that when there isn't any money available." The inference is a lack of funds, along with aforementioned challenges surrounding human resources, has affected RtI programs in ways which have made those systems more difficult to initiate and manage. Subject M suggested, "Differences in resources from school to school have helped produce many different types of response to intervention programs in the region."

Comparison with the Scholarly Record

A review of the academic record suggested the standard-treatment model would be prevalent, so this was anticipated (King & Coughlin, 2016). However, the academic intervention programs administrators, counselors, and teachers in rural secondary schools described were versions of RtI which cannot be described exclusively as standard-treatment or problem-solving models. The expectation was there would be a prevalent model of RtI, and it likely would be the standard-treatment version. While data gathered from respondents did suggest the standard-treatment protocol was the leading model of intervention used in their schools, the margin was so close as to be indeterminate.

The responses about which RtI model was most prevalent lacked definitiveness, because frequently, respondents described characteristics of both models when detailing the RtI programs used in their schools. In rural secondary schools, respondents described hybrid operational RtI models, which included components of both standard-treatment and problem-solving versions of RtI. Additionally, these hybrid models, while having

standardized and recognizable components of RtI, had little consistency from one school to another.

Responses focused on general understanding provided insight into variations of RtI implementation from school to school in the following areas: (a) problem-solving or standard-treatment model, (b) levels and types of professional development, (c) universal staff knowledge, and (d) difficulties encountered. These accounts provided information on how secondary administrators, teachers, and counselors described RtI within their particular schools. The interviews also provided insight into levels of staff understanding in terms of RtI, their perceptions of intervention strategies, and variations in understanding of operational RtI programs. The researcher concentrated the analysis on the specific descriptors participants used to describe RtI programs in their schools as a means for determining variation among schools and classifying the differences in staff knowledge on RtI.

The factors respondents described referenced the overall fidelity of their RtI programs and efforts to manage them. Respondents indicated fidelity was a way to describe the factors of time, roles, professional development, resources, and leadership as one term. Therefore, fidelity was considered an important measurement of RtI implementation and management.

Conclusions

Based upon interviews, one definitive finding was that RtI in rural secondary schools lacks fidelity. Simply put, because RtI programs have been noticeably adapted from one school to the next, these programs either do not include essential components, or the essential components are dissimilar from standardized models. For example, the

scholarly record on RtI uniformly described the screening tools and data-monitoring procedures and how those should be used. Participants described screening procedures and progress monitoring strategies with little similarity to officially recognized essential components. The biggest difference had to do with consistency and application of screening and progress monitoring. Respondent transcripts repeatedly showed there were wide disparities from one school to another, as well as between schools studied and the literature.

In order for an RtI program to be implemented with fidelity in a rural secondary school, the effort must include resource allocation to support continuous professional development. In addition to the fiscal resource support, there should also be consideration of necessary human resources. The hiring and retention of staff should include screening for those who are qualified in data-based decision making, knowledgeable about RtI, and support the idea of intervention-based strategies used to address academic deficiency. Respondents referred to themselves and their colleagues as resources when they spoke of retention. Traditionally, staff retention in rural schools has been higher than in urban schools (Lesh, 2013). In the scholarly record, this dynamic is seen as an asset (Huffman et al., 2014). Respondents for this study indicated retention has become a problem as they communicated the turnover in their schools has a negative effect on program fidelity.

In addition to resource support, maintaining an RtI program with fidelity requires setting expectations and having consistent administrative support. Respondents universally referred to the effect administrators should have on RtI programs by establishing support and setting expectations. Administrators, responsible for evaluating

performance and holding staff to account for responsibilities, have the capacity to delegate, define tasks, and assess responsibilities (Huffman et al., 2014). Doing so at a high commitment level, according to the transcript record, precludes resistance to change, deterioration of performance, and overburdening of staff.

Chapter Five: Summary and Conclusions

Educators in rural secondary schools, like their counterparts in urban elementary schools, have valid questions about best practices for students who are struggling academically. As social reform has progressed, it is not surprising that educational reform has followed suit, and all those working in the field of education have experienced firsthand the influence of legislation on their profession (Carter, 2013). For example, in 2004 the IDEA introduced changes in how struggling students were identified and assisted by special educational services (Hall & Mahoney, 2015). This development expanded beyond special education when it was recognized data-based progress monitoring and individualized instruction were best practices (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011). As the field of education endorsed multi-tiered support systems, educators and administrators were tasked with implementing and managing new programs like RtI (Kauffman et al., 2015). This study was designed to go beyond a legislative overview to describe the RtI programs operating in rural secondary schools from the viewpoints of those addressing academic deficiencies through implementation of interventions.

The application of multi-tiered intervention models in urban elementary-level schools is well-described in the scholastic record. However, the application of multi-tiered intervention models in rural secondary-level schools is limited in the scholastic record. This study was designed to fill this void by describing the perceptions of rural secondary-level educators who are managing RtI programs in order to provide a resource for understanding multi-tiered academic interventions. This study was designed to illustrate how rural secondary administrators, counselors, and teachers describe the challenges they perceive as they implement tiered academic intervention programs.

Are the perceptions of rural secondary-level educators distinguishable from those of urban elementary-level educators? Do rural educators implementing RtI have similar understandings of RtI and its mechanisms as do their urban elementary colleagues? Do rural educators implementing RtI encounter similar or unique obstacles? Do they propose similar or unique solutions? In sum, the rationale for conducting this descriptive study into the experiences and perceptions of rural secondary-level teachers, counselors, and administrators managing RtI programs was to promote an understanding of multi-tiered support systems from an underrepresented category of educators.

Background

In the latter half of the 20th century, multi-tiered support systems, like RtI, gradually became common practice in the educational profession (Mitchiner et al., 2014). Federal and state jurisprudence (mainly the EHA of 1975, the IDEA of 1990, the ESEA of 2001, the EHA of 2001, and the 2004 revision to 1990's IDEA) both directly and indirectly institutionalized multi-tiered support systems within the U.S. educational system (Hall & Mahoney, 2015). Response to intervention is a multi-tiered educational strategy intended to aid in the early identification and support of struggling learners, who because of learning and/or behavioral needs, have been unsuccessful in conventional academic settings (Brown-Chidsey & Steege, 2011). Response to intervention is characterized as a multi-tiered framework and is intended to (a) triage struggling learners; (b) catalog their academic maladies through the use of specific assessment data; (c) apply targeted interventions designed to improve performance; and (d) transform students into successful learners over the duration of their academic careers (Morrison et al., 2014). By seeking to understand the perspectives of those directly involved in managing RtI

programs in rural secondary schools, this investigation was focused on describing levels of understanding of RtI, depicting the challenges described when implementing and operationalizing RtI, and outlining steps necessary to operationalize effective RtI programs.

This was a linear examination concentrating on factors affecting the implementation of RtI from the perspectives of staff tasked with executing academic interventions in rural secondary schools. Of interest were the aptitudes, perceptions, and insights of those directly tasked with the implementation of RtI. Descriptions of the factors were elicited from teachers, counselors, and administrators working in rural secondary schools. Once perspectives on RtI were gathered from administrators, counselors, and teachers in rural secondary schools, the inquiry concluded by outlining what respondents expressed as necessary resources and practices for RtI to function in rural secondary schools.

Many educators and administrators tasked with implementation of new programs, particularly those inclined to resist change, those who are not well-trained, or those who feel overburdened, fail at the task (Castro-Villarreal et al., 2014). Combined with a lack of guidance in secondary-level RtI implementation, as well as the disparity between rural and urban realities, there is an implication in the scholarly record that having a successful RtI program in a rural secondary school is problematic (King et al., 2012). In reaction, this study was intended to supplement the limited scholarly research related to RtI and the effect this program has on teachers, counselors, and administrators in rural secondary schools.

Findings

From the perspectives of those managing RtI programs, there were identifiable similarities between the scholastic record, a record which has predominantly explored tiered intervention programs as they exist in urban elementary schools, and what was described by the respondents of this study, educators working in rural secondary-level schools. There were also identifiable differences described when participants were asked about RtI frameworks in their rural secondary schools. Particularly, differences were identified in the adaptations and distinctive variations of RtI models (Mellard, Frey, & Woods, 2012).

In the scholastic record, educators and administrators have described academic intervention programs with challenges in the following areas: (a) multiple role assignment, (b) time management, (c) lack of staff buy-in, (d) resistance to change by staff, (e) resource allocation, (f) general program knowledge and understanding, (g) inadequate recruitment and training, and (h) issues with effective leadership (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014). These were also the predominant trends discovered in the transcripts from respondents to this study. Interestingly, both the scholastic record and respondents in this study tended to group operational circumstances into one identifier called "fidelity." Like the scholastic record, respondents in this investigation identified programs, or parts of particular programs, which were functioning well as benefiting from high levels of fidelity, with the inverse also being evident in the scholastic record and respondent transcripts.

To answer the first research question of this study, administrators, counselors, and teachers in rural secondary schools were asked to describe identifiable traits of RtI

programs in their schools. The intent was to elicit the perspectives of rural secondary school principals, teachers, and counselors as they implemented and managed tiered academic intervention programs. Respondents from all three focus groups appeared to be influenced by the roles they play as administrators, counselors, and teachers. Administrator and counselor descriptions were similar, while the responses of teachers lacked specificity on RtI traits and essential components. While administrators and counselors provided technical descriptions of RtI by illustrating components like progress monitoring and tiers, teachers demonstrated more familiarity with the intervention component. Administrators and counselors went into detail describing progress monitoring, and teachers went into detail describing how they develop and apply interventions.

Administrators spoke positively of program effectiveness, while counselors and teachers gave responses which tended to criticize program effectiveness. There is an identifiable scarcity in the scholastic record of examples where RtI programs or models vary in their design and application. This researcher's investigation of the literature revealed a multitude of examples where the ever-present urban elementary-level perspective did not distinguish among the roles of administrators, counselors, and teachers as RtI programs and their realities were described.

When respondents were asked to report obstacles to implementing RtI, all three focus groups had unique perspectives. Administrators tended to focus on scarcity of resources, both financial and personnel. Counselors portrayed programs where they held a high level of responsibility. Many counselors focused their responses on roles, leadership deficiencies, and problems with staff training and buy-in. One counselor

spoke exclusively of resistance to change being the greatest obstacle to RtI. Teacher responses referenced two primary obstacles: leadership deficiencies and a lack of ongoing training. Interestingly, teachers reported the need to hire staff already experienced in RtI. All three focus groups mentioned anticipated obstacles, such as a shortage of time and the difficulties of scheduling intervention into the daily schedule without having to take away from instructional time.

When asked for advantages of RtI, respondents from the three focus groups provided similar information. Their perceptions of advantages all included statements of how interventions help struggling learners. No respondent provided specifics or defined "help" using statistical information. The scholarly record provides a great deal of statistical data on the effectiveness of RtI programs in assisting students, but that record does not clearly distinguish between rural and urban or elementary and secondary schools. The scholarly record does, however, provide some information on the success of RtI programs in middle school environments.

As for disadvantages, the focus groups had differing perceptions. Three administrators listed taking on a new program as a disadvantage. They included statements about maintaining efficacy with all the programs they must manage. These three also brought forth the matter of allocation of resources when trying to provide for several programs at the same time. Counselor and teacher responses about disadvantages were indistinguishable from their responses to the question about obstacles. Counselors spoke of an increase in their responsibility level. They linked this to the issue of lack of time and again brought up lack of leadership as a disadvantage. Teachers listed the

implementation of RtI as a positive while again detailing shortcomings in training, need for experienced replacements, and need for time to both teach and provide interventions.

When asked how implementation of RtI has affected the roles of rural secondary administrators, counselors, and teachers, administrators did not describe any sweeping changes. Again, principals detailed commitments to training and advocating for resources. It was expected, based upon the scholarly record, administrators would have also responded by describing the need to follow-up with student progress, but there was little said about this. Also, while several counselors and teachers critiqued their programs as lacking when it came to retraining and hiring experienced staff, none of the administrators referenced retention or the hiring of staff skilled in RtI.

All counselors responded to the question about changing roles by describing an increase in responsibility. The respondents who identified as counselors depicted their part in implementing and managing an RtI program as one of their primary obligations. Counselors described having to educate classroom staff, being in charge of progress monitoring, facilitating communication, and being accountable to program fidelity. Counselors provided insight to issues of program efficacy, such as lack of buy-in, resistance to change, lack of retraining, and not hiring replacement staff knowledgeable about RtI programs.

Classroom teachers responded to the question about roles changing by describing an obligation to develop and apply interventions for struggling learners (Kemmis et al., 2013). Two of the teachers stated this did not represent a change in roles, while all the other teacher respondents made no such distinction. One teacher did go into detail about having to become better at communicating with other staff, especially the counselor in

her building. Another teacher used the requirement of developing interventions as a way to criticize RtI, basing her opinion on a lack of time to accomplish all she was already obligated to do.

What constitutes an RtI program in rural secondary schools from the perspective of administrators, counselors, and teachers working in those schools? Respondents from all three focus groups repetitively described RtI programs noticeably adapted in form and function from one school to the next. The scholastic record contains an abundance of information about RtI programs from the perspective of urban elementary-level staff, and from this perspective programs are noticeably homogeneous from one district to another.

The literature could be interpreted as suggesting RtI programs within urban elementary-level schools are steadfastly modeled on specific templates, and there exists resistance to adaptation and improvisation. These programs either do not include essential components, or the essential components are dissimilar from standardized models. For example, the scholarly record on RtI uniformly describes screening tools and data-monitoring procedures and how those should be used. Participants described screening procedures and progress monitoring strategies which had little similarity to officially recognized essential components. The biggest difference had to do with consistency and application of screening and progress monitoring. Respondents repeatedly revealed there are wide disparities from one school to another, as well as from schools studied and the literature.

In addressing the last research question, respondents from all three focus groups identified what they think is required in order for an RtI program to be implemented with fidelity in a rural secondary school. Respondents from all three groups made statements

about how the effort needs to include resource allocation to support continuous professional development. In addition to this resource support, there should also be consideration of the human resources required. When hiring and retaining staff, districts need to include screening for those qualified in data-based decision making, those who are not resistant to change, those who are knowledgeable about tiered intervention programs like RtI, and those who support the idea of intervention-based strategies to address academic deficiency. An emergent feature was the idea that those who are considered for employment, as well as existing staff, should be adaptable when it comes to program implementation, identifying program inadequacies and supporting solutions to promote program efficacy, even if those solutions are not conventional.

Another finding involved the notion of staff retention. Respondents frequently referred to themselves and their colleagues as resources when they brought up the importance of retaining experienced staff. Traditionally, staff retention in rural schools has been higher than in urban schools (Lesh, 2013). In the scholarly record, this dynamic of rural schools is seen as an asset (Huffman et al., 2014). Respondents indicated retention has been a problem, and they communicated about the turnover rate in their schools and the resultant negative effect this has on RtI program fidelity. Respondents described the loss of experienced administrators, counselors, and teachers as a direct impediment to the effectiveness of RtI.

Respondents from all three focus groups described particular circumstances in which challenges to program fidelity exist. These challenges included the following: (a) insufficient delegation of responsibilities and corresponding lack of accountability, (b) lack of scheduled time devoted to follow-up observations and training, (c) disregard for

recruiting or screening new staff proficient in RtI, (d) RtI programs lacking systematic resources, and (e) not retaining experienced staff. All of the aforementioned challenges contributed to an environment of diminished program fidelity, something well-documented in the scholastic record. Respondents explained this dynamic also led to adaptations to the RtI framework in their schools, something not encountered in the scholastic record.

In addition to resource support for maintaining an effective RtI program, respondents frequently described the importance of administrative leadership. Specifically, respondents described effective program leadership as setting defined expectations, providing consistent support, and establishing accountability. This is something widely supported in the scholastic record. Administrators, responsible for evaluating performance and holding staff accountable for responsibilities, have the capacity to delegate, define tasks, and assess responsibilities (Huffman et al., 2014). Leadership at a high commitment level, according to the transcript record, precludes resistance to change, deterioration of performance, and an overburdening of staff (Sansosti, Noltemeyer, & Goss, 2010).

Conclusions

The scholarly record has had a tendency to depict RtI from the perspective of those working in urban elementary-level schools, thus dismissing perspectives of those working with RtI in rural and secondary-level schools. This tendency to research multi-tiered intervention frameworks from the perspectives of those working in urban elementary-level schools has led to an imprecise template, potentially misleading those working in rural secondary-level schools and having negative consequences on their

efforts to manage effective RtI programs. In sum, the scholarly record might not be an effective professional development resource for all educators managing RtI programs.

There are similarities between rural secondary-level staff and their urban elementary-level colleagues. These similarities include the following: (a) perceptions of the RtI framework, operational knowledge of the concept, and steps to apply the concept; (b) the essential components of an RtI framework (specifically the standardized application of a data-based screening method and a standardized strategy for intervening in academic deficiency); (c) issues of program fidelity (e.g., the effects of quality professional development, recruitment and training of knowledgeable staff, and quality of leadership); and (d) identification of the steps taken to ensure program fidelity (e.g., management of roles, delegation of program responsibilities, and accountability).

Also discovered were differences between rural secondary-level staff and urban elementary-level staff. These differences included the following: (a) challenges faced with resource allocation (both human and financial); (b) the issue of multiple roles and shortage of staff; (c) recruitment of experienced personnel; (d) steps taken to ensure program fidelity; (e) and the extensive adaptation of the RtI framework described in rural secondary schools (Johnson et al., 2009). It is the adaptation of the RtI framework which stood out as most distinctive. The scholarly record portrays a narrative in which RtI programs are similar from district to district and from school to school. It could be said this promotes an idea there must be a strict and narrow definition of RtI frameworks in order for the programs to be effective. However, this study revealed significant variation in programs, and despite dissimilarities, those programs are effectual enough to continue to be in use.

Another interesting observation is directly related to the aforementioned diversification in RtI programs. Respondents to this study, when describing the challenges they face, often illustrated distinct "fixes" they have either suggested or applied to their programs. While respondents explained how these solutions addressed problems with their programs, this researcher noted how this process created one-of-a-kind multi-tiered intervention programs. It is this adaptability which seems to promote effective RtI frameworks in rural secondary-level schools.

Implications for Practice

This qualitative study of RtI involved collection of information based upon the scholastic record and the perceptions of educators implementing programs in rural secondary schools. The application of RtI in rural secondary schools introduced elements to the study that were both anticipated as well as those not predicted. For example, discovering RtI programs in urban elementary schools faced similar challenges in fidelity as those programs operating in rural secondary schools was not unexpected. Establishing both demographics struggled with program buy-in, recruiting experienced people, and program leadership was predicted. However, the discovery that rural secondary schools seem more likely to incorporate adaptations leading to divergent RtI programs was not predicted. Response to intervention programs in rural secondary schools seem to have undergone degrees of adaptation at levels not documented in the scholastic record. The need to adapt appears to have been a by-product of necessity in rural secondary schools, but further investigation would be needed to determine the frequency of adaptation and to discover its impact and effectiveness in managing program efficacy.

Recommendations for Future Research

Unlike their urban elementary-level colleagues, educators in rural secondary schools of southwest Missouri lack a template for the implementation of RtI programs germane to their demographic and grade level. This study furthered the understanding of RtI within the context of rural secondary schools, but the findings of this research are not definitive enough to be considered a template for program implementation or management. In fact, it should be pointed out the findings of this study likely lead to many more questions than were answered.

There are more opportunities for researchers to investigate RtI implementation from the perspectives of educators working in rural secondary schools. The context of RtI implementation and management is the variable which provides the occasion for further investigation. For example, future investigations could focus on the timeline of implementation for RtI frameworks in rural schools, both elementary and secondary. The supposition is that changes in regulations have an effect on the processes and procedures of tiered intervention programs. In such a context, research questions could be written as follows: Is there an appropriate time for program introduction and professional development? Are staff provided time to integrate new directives, to establish buy-in, and to instill fidelity? Given a mandate in either rules or regulations, are RtI programs similar from one district to another or from one building to another? Again, this line of investigation would presume implementation of a multi-tiered intervention program is state-required.

Educational staff working in rural secondary schools have been implementing RtI programs modeled after those developed and studied in rural elementary environments.

This has challenged those working in rural secondary schools with establishment of RtI programs and with determination of the most effective processes and procedures. An examination of the academic record and descriptive analysis of those managing RtI in rural secondary schools led to an identification of similar challenges for both realities.

This study also revealed distinctions between the different realities. Differences between urban elementary templates and those of rural secondary schools provide much opportunity for further study. Of particular interest would be the study of program adaptation, as it is apparently unique and certainly underexplored in the scholastic record of RtI programs.

Summary

To address the research questions in this study, respondent data were collected and analyzed. The intent was to present a descriptive analysis of RtI programs implemented in rural secondary schools from the perspectives of those educators most directly involved. This was done in conjunction with an effort to gain further understanding of institutional RtI programs described in the academic record. The scholastic narrative of RtI programs could be influenced by contextual factors, such as being described from the perspective by educators who work in urban schools at the elementary level.

It was an expectation of this researcher there would be similarities in the perspectives of the two demographics, both in the descriptions of RtI and in how the programs are implemented. It was also an expectation that any differences in how RtI is implemented and managed would be directly relatable to the contrasts in settings and grade levels. While there would, of course, be similarities and differences in the

descriptions from respondents to this study and those in the scholastic record, it was expected that RtI, as a program, would be similar in procedure and format from school to school and from grade level to grade level. It was discovered RtI programs, as described by the scholastic record, are decidedly homogenous. Such programs operate very much the same in form and function from district to district and from school to school. Conversely, RtI programs in rural secondary schools, while having many of the same challenges and barriers, are noticeably heterogeneous in procedure and application. Multi-tiered intervention programs in this setting have clear and identifiable variations in form and function from district to district and from school to school.

Respondents described the challenges they face while implementing and managing RtI programs within their schools. They spoke of the burden presented by having to take on multiple roles in an environment already short on time. They identified barriers like a shortage of staff buy-in, resistance to change, and lack of accountability. They described other barriers to best practice, such as lack of program understanding as a byproduct of insufficient professional development and shortages in hiring knowledgeable staff. Respondents spoke of program fidelity when describing the shortcomings of program leadership.

Respondents not only listed their critiques of RtI programs, they presented ideas and strategies for alleviating the barriers and promoting best practice. These ideas and strategies included investing in high-quality and recurrent training, streamlining procedures, and establishing program accountability. It is in this presentation of solutions that respondents described the extent of adaptations their programs had undergone. This then revealed the program diversity which exists in rural secondary schools, something

not described in journals, articles, and other publications on the topic of RtI frameworks and best practices. The insights provided allow those managing such programs in distinctive conditions, such as in rural high schools, the opportunity to enhance the effectiveness of their academic intervention programs.

Appendix A

IRB Approval

Wylie, Richard W
<rww171@lionmail.lindenwood.edu>

IRBNet Board Action

Michael Leary <no-reply@irbnet.org> Fri, Dec 9, 2016 at 4:22 PM
Reply-To: Michael Leary <mleary@lindenwood.edu>
To: Richard Wylie <rww171@lionmail.lindenwood.edu>, Jerry Moore <nmoore@mansfieldschool.net>, Sherry DeVore <sdevore@lindenwood.edu>, Gary Greene <ggreene@mansfieldschool.net>, Kathy Grover <kgrover@lindenwood.edu>

Please note that Lindenwood University Institutional Review Board has taken the following action on IRBNet:

Project Title: [990947-1] “Response to Intervention: A Study of Intervention Programs in Rural Secondary Schools”
Principal Investigator: Richard Wylie, B.S., M.A., Ed. S.

Submission Type: New Project
Date Submitted: November 28, 2016

Action: APPROVED
Effective Date: December 9, 2016
Review Type: Exempt Review

Should you have any questions you may contact Michael Leary at mleary@lindenwood.edu.

Thank you,
The IRBNet Support Team

www.irbnet.org

Appendix B

Recruitment Letter

Dear Colleague,

This is an invitation for administrators, counselors, and teachers working in rural Missouri secondary schools to participate in interviews for a research study entitled *Response to Intervention: A Study of Intervention Programs in Rural Secondary Schools.* I am completing this study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Doctorate in Educational Administration through Lindenwood University.

This research will require about 1-2 hours. During this time, you will be interviewed about your experiences with intervention strategies used in your school to address academic deficiencies and your perceptions of Response to Intervention (RtI) as it applies to your school. The interviews will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place and will be digitally recorded.

There are no anticipated risks or discomforts related to this research. Several steps will be taken to protect your anonymity and identity. While the interviews will be recorded, all electronic data will be password-protected on a secure server. All data will be under my direct supervision for three years following the completion of the project. The typed interviews will NOT contain any mention of your name, and any identifying information from the interview will be removed. The typed interviews will also be kept in a locked filing cabinet at my office.

If you would like to participate in this study, please respond to [redacted] or contact me at [redacted]. I will forward you the letter of informed consent and then contact you to arrange the time and place for the interview.

With the kindest of regards,

Richard W. Wylie

Doctoral Candidate

Lindenwood University

Appendix C

Informed Consent

LINDENWOOD

INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

"**Response to Intervention: A Study of Intervention Programs in Rural Secondary Schools**"

Principal Investigator Richard William Wylie Jr.
Telephone: [redacted] E-mail: [redacted]

Participant_____

Contact info _____

1. You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Richard Wylie under the guidance of Dr. Sherry DeVore. The purpose of this research is to determine if there are notable variances between implementation and management of RtI frameworks in rural secondary schools versus urban elementary schools. Additionally, if there are variations, the purpose is to identify them specifically and provide a much-lacking resource for rural educators and administrators.

2. Your participation will involve
   - Participating in a focus group by answering questions pertaining to your perceptions of interventions to address student academic deficiency.

   - Your participation should require 1 to 2 hours. You will be answering questions pertaining to your experiences with intervention strategies used in your school to address academic deficiencies and your perceptions of Response to Intervention (RtI) as it applies to your school.

   - There will be no direct compensation or other benefits for you participating in this study. However, your participation will contribute to the knowledge about Response to Intervention and how it is implemented, managed, and made effective in rural secondary schools.

   - There are no anticipated risks associated with this research.

- Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw your consent at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. You will NOT be penalized in any way should you choose not to participate or to withdraw.

- All efforts will be made to protect your privacy. Your identity will not be revealed in any publication or presentation that may result from this study. The information collected will remain in the possession of the investigator in a safe location.

- If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study, or if any problems arise, you may call the Investigator, Richard Wylie, at [redacted] or the Faculty Advisor, Dr. Sherry DeVore, at [redacted]. You may also ask questions of or state concerns regarding your participation to the Lindenwood Institutional Review Board (IRB) by contacting Dr. Marilyn Abbott, Provost, at mabbott@lindenwood.edu or 636-949-4912.

I have read this consent form and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I will also be given a copy of this consent form for my records. I consent to my participation in the research described above.

_____		_____	
Participant's Signature	Date	Participant's Printed Name	
_____		_____	
Signature of Principal Investigator	Date	Investigator Printed Name	

Appendix D

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. What is your current position/title:
    a. Certified teacher?
    b. Counselor?
    c. Administrator?
2. In your school, do academically at-risk students consistently receive interventions designed to address the deficiency? If yes, please describe the framework. If no, please explain how your school addresses at-risk students.
3. Within your school, do a majority of students identified as having learning disabilities achieve grade-level benchmarks in the core content areas?
4. Would regular education teachers be able to implement more differentiated and targeted interventions if they had additional resource support? If yes, describe the support needed. If no, explain.
5. Is implementation of interventions in regular education classrooms resulting in academic success for more students in your school? Why or why not?
6. How is the degree of a student's academic deficiency established in your school—by how far they are from mastering learner objectives or in how quickly they respond to intervention(s)?
7. Describe the system of progress monitoring used in your school to evaluate effective interventions for students with learning deficiencies.
8. In your school, is teacher experience or judgment more influential in determining interventions than student-centered data?

9. In your school, if students are not achieving grade-level expectations, are they given additional resources? If yes, give some examples of those resources.
10. Do you feel well-trained and prepared to intervene when a student is academically struggling? If yes, explain your understanding of an interventionist approach. If no, please explain why.
11. Does your school district support an interventionist approach to addressing academically underperforming students? If yes, please describe how.
12. Do the leaders of your school district promote accommodation and intervention when addressing academic deficiency? Explain.
13. Have you experienced success in assisting academically struggling students by employing interventions and closely monitoring the results of those interventions? Please describe.
14. Do you feel qualified to identify what data are needed to determine the percentage of students who are meeting grade-level expectations? Explain.
15. Can you identify what resources are allocated to address academic underachievement? Describe.
16. Would you feel comfortable directing others in the processes of intervention and teaching them to implement an interventionist framework? If no, please explain.
17. Is it common practice in your school to use data to determine whether standard instruction requires adjustment or if interventions are required?
18. How does your school identify the appropriate intervention(s) to use to assist struggling learners?

19. Does your school have specific types of data it uses to determine the percentage of students in general education classrooms who achieved grade-level benchmarks and those who did not? If yes, what are they?
20. Could you describe a routine intervention plan for your school?

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Vita

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