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# The Impact of Response to Intervention on Special Education Identification

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THE IMPACT OF RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION ON SPECIAL EDUCATION  
IDENTIFICATION

By

NAESHA PARKS

(Under the Direction of Dr. Linda M. Arthur)

ABSTRACT

Response to intervention is a process designed to provide students with interventions before they are identified as students who are served through special education services as students who have disabilities. RTI is a general education initiative that allows students to receive targeted interventions in their areas of weakness before they are referred to special education. The implementation of RTI has had a significant effect of education. This study explored the perceptions of how teachers and administrators felt regarding special education identification since the implementation of RTI. This study makes both theoretical and practical contributions to the fields of education and school leadership.

This was a qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews and focus groups and an analysis of referral data three years prior and three years after the implementation of RTI. Purposeful sampling of teachers from four schools in one county was used to select the participants for the focus groups. Four administrators from the exact four schools were interviewed as well.

An open coding method of analysis was used to analyze and interpret data. Four broad themes emerged from the data to address the research questions.

INDEX WORDS: Response-to-intervention, special education, tiers of intervention,  
administrative leadership, school wide intervention.

THE IMPACT OF RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION ON SPECIAL EDUCATION  
IDENTIFICATION

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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THE IMPACT OF RESPONSE TO INTERVENTION ON SPECIAL EDUCATION

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## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to both of my children. I have worked extremely hard to set a positive example for you both so that one day, you will be able to reflect and understand that despite any obstacles placed in your path, you should always finish what you started. Completing this journey was important because it will allow us to better our lives. Please always remember to put God first and He will never allow you to abandon any of your dreams. I love you, Mommy.

This dissertation also is dedicated to my granddad James Reese. Granddaddy, my goal was to finish this before you went on to be with the Lord. I can only hope that you are very proud of me. I love you dearly. Forever, rest in peace and yes “it is a nice day outside.”

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## **CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION**

As recently as 2008, new laws, such as No Child Left Behind require that all children be served in their least restrictive environment (Horn, Palmer, Purcell, 2006). The least restrictive environment is an environment in which a student who has a disability has the opportunity to be educated with students who do not have disabilities. The Response to Intervention (RTI) component of new laws hold general education teachers accountable for providing research based interventions and monitoring the progress of those students participating in the intervention (McCook, 2007). With the implementation of the RTI process, accountability for all students has increasingly become essential in the educational process. Identifying students who are struggling academically and providing them with early intervention in the RTI process can reduce the number of students identified in special education (McCook, 2007). Dowing and Peckham (2007) found that all students benefited either socially or academically from the practice of inclusive education. Although there are significant advantages and disadvantages within the RTI model, research is still needed to determine the impact of the Response to Intervention model on the identification of special education students.

### **History**

#### **Introduction of RTI**

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires the use of instructional practices that have been proven through rigorous scientific research to be effective in helping struggling students (DOE Fact Sheet 2004). The U.S. Congress mandated scientific research to help teachers and policymakers identify essential skills and instructional methods needed to achieve success (NRP, 2000). Through this mandate, the Response to

Intervention (RTI) Model was formed. Because of the RTI process, students with disabilities are being served in general education settings. For example, if a student has a documented disability in the area of reading, he or she might be served in an inclusive classroom for all other core areas without direct instruction from the special education teacher with the exception of reading. In addition, schools have begun using formative assessments to monitor instruction and make informed decisions about student progress toward annual goals. RTI calls for general educators to provide students with and without disabilities with research based interventions and monitor their progress regularly to determine growth (Ardoin, 2005). The progress of all students is monitored in the inclusive setting throughout the RTI process (Ardoin, 2005).

In the absence of increased time to devote to individual students, some teachers presume that the students in general education will miss key concepts because of the amount of time the teachers spend with students with disabilities. Therefore, the practice of identifying and removing students with disabilities from the general education setting was a common practice before the RTI model was implemented (Ardoin, 2005). The resource model was designed to provide individualized instruction to students with disabilities in a separate setting other than the general education classroom (Ardoin, 2005). However, in the qualitative cross study analysis by Klinger and Vaughn (1998), researchers sought to determine the perception of students in inclusive settings. Forty students participated in the study. Researchers found that, in some cases, students with disabilities benefit more from being pulled out of the classroom rather than remaining in it. All services for students should be based on the least restrictive environment. Further, accessibility and access to the curriculum in the least restrictive environment



should remain the focal point of the decision-making process. It is during the decision-making process that it is most important to look at early intervention services and how RTI can meet the needs of a student without the student being identified as having a disability.

### **The Discrepancy Model**

When Congress reauthorized IDEA, they changed the laws regarding identification of children with specific learning disabilities (Wright, 2005). Prior to the implementation of RTI, the discrepancy model was used to determine whether a child qualified for special education services. In the discrepancy model, the IQ-Achievement approach assessed whether there was a significant difference between a student's score on a general intelligence measure and his or her score on achievement measures (Speece, Molloy, Case, 2003). The discrepancy model was commonly used to identify children with learning disabilities. If a student's score on an IQ test was at least two standard deviations higher than his or her score on an achievement measure, the student was described as having a significant discrepancy between IQ and achievement and thereby, having a learning disability(Wright, 2005). The discrepancy model changed with the implementation of RTI.

### **The RTI Conceptual Framework**

Accountability under NCLB (NRP, 2000), along with the pressure to improve student achievement and reduce over-representation of minorities in special education, has caused school districts to use research-based methodology and data to make informed instructional decisions. School systems have begun using formative assessments to evaluate research-based intervention programs. In addition, districts

have begun using formative assessments to monitor instruction and make informed decisions about student progress toward annual goals. Formative data provides concrete data that are specific to individual student performance (McCook, 2007). Summative data are collected regularly at the end of the school year from states' high stakes tests and should not be used to make instructional decisions (McCook, 2007). By contrast, formative data is collected several times throughout the school year and has been used to help districts guide instruction.

The Response to Intervention (RTI) framework, a system that has fostered the use of formative data, has been shown to be an effective and well-researched method for improving achievement for all students (Johnson & Mellard 2007, McCook 2007, Wright 2007). When RTI is implemented effectively, students with academic difficulties can be identified before the achievement gap widens and students are referred for special education placement. Bender and Shores (2007) contended that RTI could help schools meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) because of its emphasis on research-based instructional methodology.

Many state departments of education and local school systems have moved to the use of a Response to Intervention (RTI) educational model to address the requirements of NCLB and IDEA (IDEA, 2004; NADSE, 2007; Wright, 2007). According to the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NADSE, 2007), RTI has demonstrated to provide high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need. Interventions that are evidence-based and match student need have been paramount to improving student achievement (REL Southeast, 2007). Within the RTI framework, progress is monitored frequently to make adjustments in instruction or

goals and a child response to data is used to make informed educational decisions. Mellard and Johnson (2007) defined RTI as a process for identifying, monitoring, and delivering research-based instructional interventions through a tiered framework to students who have learning difficulties. Each component is important to aid in the fidelity of the process. Identifying the student's learning problem is vital in that it helps to target specific areas clearly. After the area has been identified, it is important that the student's progress be monitored to determine whether the intervention is working (McCook, 2007). Wright (2007) characterized RTI as a model for providing early intervention that efficiently and flexibly delivers educational assistance to at risk learners to close skill or performance gaps. Others contend that the purpose of RTI is to improve student achievement by intervening early and assessing often (Hardcastle & Justice, 2006).

The basic components of RTI are universal screening for at-risk learners, monitoring student progress with curriculum-based measures and using high quality, research-based interventions within a tiered instructional framework (McCook, 2006). The three-tiered model has been the most widely used; however, some systems have adopted models with as many as four to eight tiers (Bender & Shores, 2007). Frequent data collection and analysis have been critical components of RTI, which allow teachers to modify instruction before students have fallen too far behind. Students who are most at-risk move up the tiers based on their response to the intervention that has been selected to meet their needs. The progression through the tiers is defined most by a screener to determine where they rank in comparison to other students.

Universal screening has been defined as the process of administering quick, timed curriculum-based measures to a grade level or an entire school, to identify those

who may be at risk for academic skill deficits in the areas of reading, math, writing and spelling (Student Progress Monitoring, 2008), which may ultimately lead to a student's placement into special education. To identify whether a student can be referred to special education, Universal Screenings and Curriculum Based Probes are used to determine the student's specific areas of weakness (Deno, 2003). A curriculum probe may be referred to as a Curriculum Based Measure (CBM). CBM was developed by Stanley Deno in 1977 to test the effectiveness of instructional programs (Deno, 2003). Since then, CBM has been researched thoroughly for its reliability and validity. Some states have used or are considering the use of CBM in high stakes decision-making (Wayman et al., 2007). CBM probes are administered easily in one- to four-minute intervals, depending on the content area (McCook, 2006). The probes measure skill fluency in the particular content area because they are timed.

The use of CBM in school as a way to identify at-risk areas in students has increased significantly over the past five to ten years (National Student Progress Monitoring website, 2008), which leads to more specific data as to whether or not students are performing well below their peers. The CBM probes become an essential part of the decision-making process in referrals to special education. More and more, school districts and State Departments of Education (SDOE) have begun using CBM or progress monitoring tools within a Response to Intervention (RTI) framework. There has been much research on CBM and their use, particularly on the predictive value concerning student achievement. CBM measures small increments of growth over time and have proven to be effective tools that help teachers and policy makers accurately assess the curriculum and students' responsiveness to instruction (National Student

Progress Monitoring website, 2008).

Research based interventions; another major component of RTI is supported by scientific evidence (McCook, 2006). NCLB defined scientifically research-based practices as “research that involves the application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs” (NCLB, 2001, p. 12). The research-based evidence of effectiveness for an intervention program should be considered before a district purchases the intervention (REL Southeast, 2007). These interventions should be peer-reviewed, with results based on reproducible methods. There should also be assurance that the interventions were implemented with fidelity and integrity. The premise behind research-based interventions is that these interventions must be replicated exactly the way they were intended. Otherwise, high-quality results are not reproducible.

The same CBM probes used to conduct universal screenings have also been used to monitor student progress and measure the effectiveness of an intervention. Progress monitoring occurs when interventionists have used CBM probes to establish a baseline and then students are assessed periodically to determine their level of performance (Safer & Fleishman, 2007). Depending upon the student’s skill deficit, progress may be monitored daily, weekly, bi-monthly, or once a month.

### **Pyramid of Interventions**

The Georgia Department of Education created a conceptual framework that allows all students in Georgia to make significant gains in their school setting. The Student Achievement Pyramid of Interventions is the mechanism for the development and implementation of Georgia’s Student Achievement Pyramid of Interventions (Dwyer

& Osher, 2000). The Student Achievement Pyramid of Interventions is a graphic organizer that illustrates various layers of instructional efforts that can be provided to students according to their individual needs. Additionally, the Student Achievement Pyramid of Intervention can serve as a structure for discussion among collaborative professional learning communities that are willing to examine and engage in all avenues available to assist students in their learning process (Dwyer & Osher, 2000). By using this conceptual framework, students are able to receive targeted interventions before being referred for special services. This conceptual framework has the potential to affect special education referrals significantly. Further, the pyramid of interventions is layered by tiers.

Tier One occurs within the core curriculum and is designed to meet the needs of a majority of the school population. There are three critical elements in Tier One: a) an effective core academic program, b) a universal screening of students at least three times per year to help determine their instructional needs, and c) the development of interventions by the classroom teacher and or RTI team to address any learning difficulties. The student's progress is monitored frequently (McCook, 2007).

Tier Two is for students who do not respond to Tier One support and need additional help to meet grade-level expectations. Students in Tier Two receive at least 30 minutes of additional instruction daily in the area of difficulty in addition to core academic instruction (McCook, 2000).

Tier Three is student support team (SST) driven learning and is designed for students who still have considerable difficulty in mastering necessary academic skills, even after Tier One and Tier Two interventions. Students in Tier Three receive a

minimum of two 30-minute sessions per day of targeted intervention in addition to the core academic instruction. A student in Tier Three that has not made progress, regressed, or responded to the two interventions that were attempted in Tier Three will continue to receive the two 30-minute sessions daily of intervention. The student will also be referred for psychological evaluation by the school system, with possible consideration of special education services if warranted (McCook, 2007).

### **Advantages of RTI**

The RTI approach has several advantages. First, it can help reduce the time a student must wait before receiving assistance in areas of weakness. RTI is a proactive approach; students are identified early as needing assistance. Second, the goal is to provide as much assistance to students as possible in their regular education classroom (Brue & Wilmshurst, 2006). If the research-based interventions are helpful, special education services may not be needed. Third, how a student responds to the intervention may provide information about particular strengths and weaknesses. Understanding what works best can help teachers provide appropriate instruction to students (Brue & Wilmshurst, 2006).

### **Disadvantages of RTI**

One of the major drawbacks of RTI is that children who are performing at grade level in certain strength areas are not acknowledged if they have a weakness in another area. In the discrepancy model, a very bright child who performed in the average range could meet the criteria for service because he or she was not performing at expectancy level. These children are not recognized as struggling and are not referred to the RTI team. Additionally, parents who may bring their concerns to the school or even provide

a private evaluation may be told that their child does not meet the criteria of a specific learning disability (Resnick, 2008) since implementation of the RTI process. Many school systems have not yet trained all staff in RTI, even though they are expected to implement the program. Teachers may not be trained adequately to deliver the research-based instruction required to collect accurate data (Resnick, 2008).

### **Leadership and RTI**

Educational accountability has shifted the direction of interventions and accountability in schools. As school administrators become involved in the RTI process, they must have the necessary skills to guide that change. For RTI to be effective, administrators along with their staff must make a paradigm shift from making the focus of Student Support Teams a means to refer students for special education services to ensure that the implementation of RTI prevents many students from being referred to special education unnecessarily. The RTI process allows students to receive intense remediation in the general education setting and student progress is monitored frequently to determine if the interventions are working. Since students are highly supported in the general education setting, administrators must be certain to reallocate funds to address specific areas where needs are greater than others. Consequently, some programs may receive less funding than they have received in the past. Other programs will receive more, based on specific needs (McCook, 2006).

Administrators should implement RTI in small increments to have the greatest impact within their schools. The role of the administrator is to move all stakeholders from their old belief system into the new RTI belief system. Many aspects of a school's culture must be taken into consideration when implementing the RTI model. Teacher



duties and roles in the RTI process are instrumental in the success of RTI. Each member is vital to the successfulness of the process. All of these aspects should be considered by administrators when assigning roles and developing professional developments for staff relative to the RTI process (McCook, 2006).

The process of universal screening is an essential aspect of RTI and can be extremely helpful when developing reports that allow administrators to have instant access to building and class-level reports. Such reports compare their school and learners to the national norms based on grade levels. By having access to reports such as these, administrators can review specific data and determine if a student has responded to the intervention. Thus, allowing them to meet the specific instructional need of each student involved in the RTI process.

Administrators should build the bridge from empirical data to the application of the interventions in the classrooms. To empower teachers effectively, the school administrator must have a knowledgeable background of all components of RTI and be prepared to provide extensive training to all stakeholders. Further, to lead in shifting the mindset of teachers regarding special education referrals and RTI, administrators should also be aware and know the function of various interventions, curriculum-based measures and the philosophy behind the shift in approach (Hardcastle & Justice, 2006).

School administrators must work to facilitate buy-in from teachers if RTI is to have any impact on special education identification. Since the RTI process has various components, it is necessary that the school administrator understand each part of the process to lead the school in the decision-making process. After the climate of change is prevalent in the school, the administrators should ensure training for all staff. RTI is a

different approach for many teachers so it will require that teachers expand their skill set. Under RTI, teachers develop new tools and competencies to assist their students, assuming that this competency will lead to less of a rush to push for students to be placed into special education. Therefore, it is clear that administrators must be certain that teachers have the necessary training and resources to implement RTI effectively.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The impact of RTI on the identification of students who qualify for special education rarely has been researched. RTI is a new initiative adopted by the state of Georgia. Thereby, a lack of research exists regarding the impact of RTI on the identification of students with disabilities. Further, one of the major reasons that RTI was implemented was to address the over-representation of minorities in special education (GDOE, 2007). Since RTI is a new initiative in Georgia, research that evaluates the effectiveness of RTI specific to the over-representation of minorities is needed to confirm whether RTI has affected this particular subgroup.

Finally, educational administrators are required to lead all stakeholders in the RTI process from the initial to final stages of referral. However, very little research includes the administrative and teacher aspects of RTI.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The current RTI initiative has made an impact on the educational setting. Previously, students were eligible for special education based on the discrepancy model. Therefore, research in this area is needed because students respond to research-based interventions differently. The purpose of this study was to provide research that investigates teacher and administrator perceptions regarding the impact of

RTI. Another purpose for this research was to provide teachers and administrators data regarding the number of referrals before and after the implementation of RTI. They can generalize this data to their own schools and plan instruction and interventions accordingly to circumvent unnecessary referrals to special education. Since one of the major initiatives that RTI was implemented to address is the over-representation of minorities in special education, the final purpose of this study was to provide research to help administrators and teachers identify and target interventions for at-risk students before they are referred to special education.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study was significant to all key stakeholders working within the RTI model. It will provide specific insight into the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding the number of referrals three years prior to RTI and three years after the implementation of RTI. This study is significant in that it provides research-based data regarding the identification of minorities since the implementation of RTI. Therefore, allowing individuals to target specific minorities who may be at risk to avoid over-representation of that subgroup in special education.

The RTI initiative requires that school administrators are knowledgeable about the components of RTI and are able to create a climate of change to affect referrals to special education for students who are at-risk academically. Administrators must manage building resources, monitor data, and lead teams in making data-driven decisions. Since RTI is a new initiative, research and reporting in this area is needed. Further, administrators can use the data from this study to generalize to their own populations.

## **Research Procedures**

### **Research Questions**

The following overarching question was answered through this study:

To what extent does Response to Intervention influence the practice of the identification of special education students?

In addition, the following sub-questions guide the study:

1. How has the number of students determined eligible for special education services changed since the implementation of the RTI model?
2. Have the number of minorities determined eligible for special education services changed since the implementation of the RTI model?
3. How do administrators and teachers account for changes in special education identification because of RTI?

### **Research Design**

This qualitative study research utilized empirical data to obtain information on the impact of RTI three years prior to and after the implementation on RTI. In addition, this study provided data on the identification of special education students particularly focusing on minorities. Included in this research is a qualitative study utilizing interviews and focus groups of administrators and teachers on the impact of RTI on special education identification.

### **Population**

The subjects for this study were selected from a large suburban school district in Georgia. In addition, in Reese-Parker County, each elementary school had a leadership team that had one representative per grade level. The teachers on the leadership teams

were used as representatives for the school during the interviewing process.

### **Sample**

The study compared the number of referrals to special education three years before and three years after the implementation of RTI. The study also compared the number of minorities deemed eligible for special education services both before and after the implementation of RTI. Finally, the study evaluated the perceptions of administrators and teachers regarding the impact of RTI and special education identification from four randomly selected schools in a large suburban school district in Georgia. Targeted interviews were conducted with four principals in Reese-Parker County. Focus group interviews were conducted with the leadership team from four schools that had general education teachers representing grades Kindergarten through eighth grade. Eight to ten teachers were in each focus group.

### **Data Collection**

This quantitative component of the study utilized a quantitative data analysis of all elementary schools in the large school district related to special education identification for three years prior to the implementation of RTI and three years after the implementation of RTI. In addition, interviews were conducted with four elementary school administrators and teacher focus groups from the four schools consisting of five to eight regular education teachers to obtain information on the impact of identification of students with disabilities since the implementation of RTI. Interviews were created and used to determine the perceptions of a specific focus group about the impact of RTI. Interviews were reviewed for recurring themes and patterns regarding RTI and the identification of special education.

In a study conducted by Morgan, Krueger, and Flower (2002), researchers determined that individual interviews are more efficient and interviewers are able to cover more ground when interviewing in person. The dynamic interchange between group members may be more in-depth and unbiased concerning the particular topic (Krueger & Flower, 2002). In addition, in research conducted by Kruger (2002), the researcher stated that information gathered from focus group interviews is able to stand on its own merit and can be used to supplement quantitative data on the same topic or issue. Kruger stated that during the group process participants most often are motivated by one another. Further, the focus group format is flexible enough to allow for in-depth probing to explore unexpected concepts and themes.

### **Data Analysis**

Data from the large school district and the number of special education referrals from 2005–2006, 2006–2007, and 2007–2008 school years to 2008–2009 and 2009–2010, 2010–2011 school years were analyzed and compared. In addition, data was gathered specific to the number of referrals for minorities before and after the implementation of RTI. An interview was used to determine the perceptions of two specific focus groups (administrators and teachers) about the impact of RTI.

### **Delimitations**

The population selected for this study is limited to selected schools, teachers, and administrators in the suburban school district in Georgia; thus, the ability to generalize the findings to other counties within other parts of the United States is severely limited.

## Definition of Terms

*Inclusion:* Inclusion is a term that expresses commitment to educate each child, to the maximum extent appropriate, in the general school and general classroom. It involves bringing the support services to the child (rather than moving the child to the services) and requires only that the child will benefit from being in the class rather than needing to keep up with the other students (Gut, 2003).

*Mainstreaming:* Mainstreaming has been used to refer to the selective placement of students who have disabilities in one or more 'general' education classes. Proponents of mainstreaming assume that a student must 'earn' his or her opportunity to be placed in general classes by demonstrating an ability to 'keep up' with the work assigned by the general classroom teacher (Gut, 2003).

*Response to Intervention (RTI):* The practice of providing high quality instruction and intervention matched to student need, with progress monitoring frequently (McCook, 2007).

*Pyramid of Interventions:* is a graphic organizer that illustrates layers of instructional efforts that can be provided to students according to their individual needs (McCook, 2007).

*Curriculum Based Measure (CBM):* A method used for monitoring the students' educational progress by direct assessment on academic skills (McCook, 2007).

*Discrepancy Model:* A model used to assess whether there is a significant difference between a student's IQ test and scores obtained on an achievement test to determine eligibility for special education (Wright, 2005).

## **Summary**

The Response to Intervention Model, as a primary motive was established in the state of Georgia as a means to increase specialized instruction of at risk students, thereby, causing a reduction in the number of premature referrals of students to special education. RTI is a new initiative in the state of Georgia. Therefore, knowledge regarding the impact of RTI on special education referrals is needed in the field of education. Little research has been conducted on the number of students who have been identified as having a disability since the implementation of RTI. RTI was intended to address the over-representation of minorities referred to special education. Little research has been conducted on the status of referrals for minorities since the implementation of RTI, so data in this area will contribute to the growing body of research for educators. In addition, administrators must understand the principals and critical components of RTI. They must train and provide resources to support the implementation of RTI. Administrators and teachers currently implementing RTI within their schools have direct knowledge regarding the RTI process and if the RTI process has affected special education identification at the school level. Research that considers administrative and teacher factors concerning the impact of RTI on special education referrals will contribute to the study of effective implementation of RTI in Georgia.



## **CHAPTER TWO REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Introduction**

The conceptual framework of Response to Intervention (RTI) begins at the national level. As a result, states and local counties have put procedures and guidelines into place as an effort to respond according to national mandates. The information below outlines RTI at the national, state and system level. The literature identifies the foundation and presents the procedures required at each level. Since RTI is a new initiative, there is little research identifying gaps and themes surrounding the impact of RTI on special education identification. Included in the literature review is a section describing various researchers and their findings regarding RTI and its impact on educational leadership.

### **Student Support Team Process before RTI**

The Students Support Team process was the process that Georgia implemented before RTI was introduced. The Student Support Team (SST) process was intended to provide support to the student and teacher through a collaborative team approach with key stakeholders. SST was based on the principle that the collaborative approach is successful when developing plans for students who are having difficulty in school. When approached in a positive manner, SST can be a valuable tool in providing for an effective educational program for students (SST Manual, 2008). Student Support Teams are most effective in schools in which all school staff have responsibility for all students and are skilled at engaging in collaborative problem solving. The process involved several basic steps that focused on individual student needs, learning styles, program effectiveness, and home/school communication. Prior to and during the first meeting,

team members gather as much relevant information as possible regarding the student's past and present educational and/or behavioral performance. Information should be gathered from a variety of sources including parents, official school records, and anecdotal records. Assessment and evaluation data were examined by the team as well (SST Manual, 2008).

The team met to discuss and interpret the information available to them. At that time, the team might decide that more information may be needed and develop a plan for obtaining the information (SST Manual, 2008).

After evaluating the current information, the team would work together to develop an individual educational plan specific to the student's strengths and weaknesses. Strategies and techniques are brainstormed and agreed upon by all those involved in the implementation process. A timeline for follow-up and evaluation of progress was established at that time. The educational plan that is developed is implemented for a specified period and additional data is gathered if needed (SST Manual, 2008) and the team would routinely meet to discuss student progress and additional data that may be present. At that time, if there is a change needed to the educational plan, adjustments are made during the SST meeting.

Finally, ongoing monitoring and evaluation was an important part of the SST process. If the educational plan was successful and there was not a disability suspected, the team continued to monitor student progress and determine when to scaffold the strategies used in the classroom. However, if a disability is suspected, the team would refer the student for psychological testing. Once testing has been completed, the team met to discuss eligibility for special education (SST Manual 2008).

## **National Guidelines for RTI**

In December of 2004, the president reauthorized that Individuals with Disabilities act (IDEA). The act provided national guidelines for school systems and teachers regarding students that have or are suspected of having disabilities. IDEA is a federal law that governs how states provide early intervention services to students with disabilities. IDEA has been reauthorized a number of times. However, there was a significant change in December of 2004, which required that all students receive a free and appropriate education (FAPE) that prepares them for advancement and independent living. FAPE is defined as an educational program designed to meet the specific needs of the child. The act requires that public schools develop an individualized education plan for students found eligible under the federal and state eligibility requirements.

Since IDEA included more flexibility of assessment practices relating to determining eligibility for services, a wider range of assessment tools and strategies could be used to determine if a child was eligible to receive special education services (Reschly & Ysseldyke, 2002). The incorporation of multiple types of assessment data also allowed for the use of more informal data such as classroom-based assessments, teacher observation, and previous evaluations to determine eligibility. IDEA stated, “if the multidisciplinary team determined that relevant functional and developmental information” adequately documented both a student’s response to interventions and documented the need for special education, then no additional testing (e.g., individualized standardized testing) need be conducted (20 U.S.C. 1414 (c) (1) (B). According to Fletcher, et al. (2002), the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA with its new rules

allow for flexibility in assessment and evaluation should have improved outcomes for students. However, special education practices changed very little.

The 2001 President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (PCESE), formed by George W. Bush to recommend improvements to IDEA through its reauthorization, instituted this new language to include RTI. The 19-member commission published its recommendations in the report *A New Era: Revitalizing Special Education for Children and Their Families*. The recommendations that supported a move toward the implementation of RTI are outlined below:

- qualifying for special education is too often the goal and not a way to improve instruction and provide an effective intervention;
- the current system uses an outdated model that waits for a child to fail, instead of a model based on prevention and intervention;
- general education and special education must share responsibility for educating children with disabilities;
- many thousands of children are misidentified for special education while others are not identified early enough or at all;
- research-based practices are not currently used;
- parents want a results-based system that is focused on the child's needs.

NCLB and IDEA both were developed with language that predicts very similar educational outcomes. NCLB recommends the use of scientifically based reading instruction, while, IDEA mandates that children should not be placed into special education resulting from poor instruction. Consequently, IDEA (2004) and NCLB gave legal burden to states and districts for implementing problem-solving models such as

RTI. IDEA 2004 has allowed for the use of scientific, research-based interventions as part of the learning disability eligibility process; however, it did not require its use. The law further states that RTI cannot be excluded if districts choose to use it (IDEA, 2004).

Not only does IDEA support the use of evidence-based interventions, it also emphasizes the use of early intervening services. The foundation of IDEA has been to intervene early to prevent a child from being required to have special education services. RTI is the concept of using federal special education dollars to support children who are at-risk, through a multi-layer model of service delivery, using research-based strategies, positive behavioral supports, and evidence-based literacy instruction (IDEA, 2004).

There have been several other national educational initiatives and policies focused on improving achievement for low achieving and underachieving students that have served as precursors to RTI. Beginning in early 1990, the National Institute for Child Health and Development (NICHD) carried out research to improve the area of reading disability (2000). Out of this investigation came significantly improved reading research and intervention strategies for struggling readers (Lyons, 1994). Another outcome of the NICHD's work is the conclusion that the use of the IQ achievement discrepancy to determine specific learning disability (SLD) eligibility does not allow children to receive treatment until after the most effective time for intervention is past (NICHD, 2000).

The National Research Council Panel on Minority Over-representation was established in 1980 and published reports relating to the issue of over-representation of minorities in special education. The reports highlighted the lack of research

substantiating the benefits of special education for minority students (NRCP, 1982). The panel published a 2002 report that highlighted prevention and early intervention to lessen the factors that make minority children more likely to be placed into special education programs. The panel recommended a four-tier intervention model and a new approach to determining eligibility for special education. One of the recommendations was RTI.

### **Georgia Guidelines for RTI**

RTI is understood to be an evidence-based approach to ensuring that early intervention is provided to struggling learners in all educational settings. Its main principles are that Tier One evidence-based instruction is provided with fidelity, student progress is monitored frequently, students are evaluated on how they respond to specific interventions, and instruction is adjusted accordingly (National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2005; Vaughn & Fuchs, 2003). It is becoming more prevalent in recent years with both federal legislation and state initiatives promoting use of RTI and similar initiatives that RTI has promise in serving as a way to address NCLB and IDEA 2004 mandates and concerns about traditional special education identification, disproportionate representation of minorities in special education, the integration of general and special education (also known as inclusive education), and the delivery of researched-based programs to students.

In Georgia, the Response to Intervention Model is based in the general education classroom. In the general education classroom, teachers are faced with the challenge of routinely implementing a strong and rigorous standards-based learning environment. The tiered approach that is used in Georgia provides layers of intervention for students

needing support. It also requires a school-wide consensus and understanding of the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS), assessment practices, and instructional pedagogy. Georgia's RTI process includes these key components:

- a four-tier delivery model designed to provide support matched to student need through the implementation of standards-based classrooms (Georgia RTI, 2008), and
- evidence-based instruction as the core of classroom pedagogy (Georgia RTI, 2008).

Evidence-based interventions utilized with increasing levels of intensity based on progress monitoring:

- the use of a variety of ongoing assessment data to determine which students are not meeting success academically and/or behaviorally,
- data teams in each school serve as the driving force for instructional decision-making in the building, and
- purposeful allocation of instructional resources based on student assessment data.

All students participate in general education learning. Students requiring interventions to meet individual learning expectations will receive support through a systematic and purposeful process. The number of students requiring interventions will decrease as the level of intensity of the intervention increases.

The RTI approach is used to improve overall school services—the School Improvement program area uses it to help schools in the AYP Needs Improvement Category. In fact, RTI's emphasis on integration of program areas, application of a

problem solving approach, and use of evidence-based instruction as well as progress monitoring data were mentioned as practices that may improve educational outcomes such as academic achievement, behavior, and graduation rates (Georgia RTI, 2008). The requirement of coordinated decision-making and resource sharing among general education, special education, and related services personnel supports its built-in programmatic collaboration process. The four-tiered model allows for fluid movement from tier to tier in response to student need. Because of this tiered intervention, Georgia’s statewide standards-based curriculum has been strengthened (Georgia RTI, 2008). Curriculum and instruction uses it as a tool to provide differentiated instruction and special education uses it as an alternative in the student eligibility decision process.

The Evidence-Based Decision Making cycle diagram below shows the process that Georgia encourages its teams to use to integrate the use of data and research in the decision-making cycle (Georgia RTI, 2008).

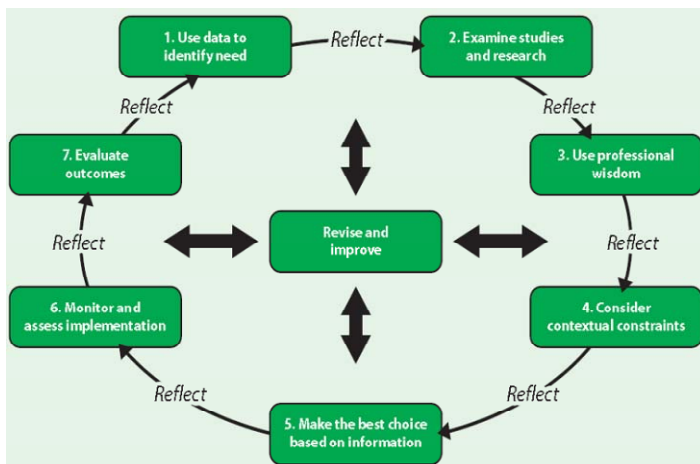


Figure 1. The Evidence-Based Decision Making Cycle (EBDM) ©The SERVE center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (2008)



## **Tier One**

All students are participants in this tier. It involves providing all students access to a standards-based curriculum implemented with fidelity instruction to be focused on the Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) and it should include differentiated evidence-based learning geared to individual student need. Data should be collected and reviewed so that it may be used to drive instruction, which could include flexibly grouping students and various learning opportunities for students. When Tier One is implemented in this way, 80-100% of students are successful in the general education classroom (Georgia RTI, 2008). Accordingly, this should reduce the number of special education referrals and placements.

## **Tier Two**

Tier Two focuses on needs-based learning. When students have not responded successfully to a strong Tier One, there is a need to move them to Tier Two. In Tier Two, which is provided in addition to Tier One, students are given a standard intervention protocol, which addresses their specific academic or behavioral weaknesses. These students are identified through universal screening data, which can include state assessments, summative assessment data and Tier One assessment data. An integral part of this tier is the progress monitoring process. Progress monitoring should be done to measure the student's response to the intervention and make decisions based on this response. When Tier Two is implemented in this way, the vast majority of students are successful in the general education classroom (Georgia RTI, 2008). This success allows the students to be successful well before being referred to special education.

### **Tier Three**

An important part of Tier Three involves consistent and accurate delivery of intervention and could include an intensified intervention. It is at this level of intervention that the RTI process becomes more individualized and diagnostic. School-level personnel often invite county-level specialists to become a part of the problem-solving team. Scientific analysis is used to discover the reasons for the students' deficiencies. Most students will be helped by the careful analysis that takes place in this tier so they will move back to Tier One or Tier Two. Of note in Tier Three, is that there is close progress monitoring used to drive decisions. Students who respond successfully to the intervention begin to receive less and less intervention. Students who do not respond successfully to the intervention are given incrementally more and more intense instruction. Ultimately, if students continue not to respond at this level, the RTI team must meet to determine if a referral is needed for specialized instruction (Reese-Parker Handbook, 2009).

### **Tier Four**

Tier Four of the Georgia pyramid involves special program placement for students who need additional supports. This tier includes special education and gifted education. Georgia's pyramid represents services and not placement. These services may be provided in the general classroom setting or in a separate setting. Students receiving Tier Four are those who did not respond to the previous three tiers. Tier Four is developed for students who need additional supports and meet eligibility criteria for special program placement including gifted education and special education. With three effective tiers in place prior to specialized services, more struggling students will be

successful and will not require this degree of intervention. Tier Four does not represent a location for services, but indicates a layer of interventions that may be provided in the general education class or in a separate setting. For students with disabilities needing special education and related services, Tier Four provides instruction that is targeted and specialized to meet student needs. If a child has already been determined as a child with a disability, then, the school system should not require additional documentation of prior interventions in the effect the child demonstrates additional delays.

### **Reese-Parker County Guidelines for RTI**

#### **Tier One**

The Reese-Parker County board of education has established comprehensive RTI procedures for the school- and county-level RTI team to follow during the RTI process. Procedures are outlined for teachers and administrators in all of the tiers of intervention. In Tier One, teachers must provide standards-based instruction to all students. Reading instruction should occur ninety minutes daily and math instruction should occur at least 60 minutes daily. When a 90-minute block is scheduled for Math, 30 minutes is built in for intervention to occur. Tier One instruction should be differentiated for all students (Reese-Parker Handbook, 2009).

Also in Tier One, teachers will administer Aimsweb reading and math measures as specified at each grade level. This will serve as the universal screening and will establish a baseline. Teachers enter data by the deadline provided by the system. The building level assistant principal schedules a data team meeting following the screening. Teachers or data/problem solving teams identify the students in the class/grade level

who are at or below the tenth percentile. The purpose of the meeting is to discuss the area(s) of underperformance and to begin looking at the cause of the underperformance. Assessments may include but are not limited to informal measures, program assessments, or 'aiming down' with other measures from Aimsweb. Further, the interventionist or the progress monitoring teacher enters the student's progress monitoring schedule in Aimsweb. The interventionist also provides 15-20 minutes of intervention to the targeted student(s) by providing supplements to the general curriculum for a minimum of 6-8 weeks in the general education classroom. The team must also establish a goal that is set to move the student to the 25th percentile for the grade level spring benchmark and monitor progress weekly according to the school schedule or grade level schedule. Finally, students are referred to the RTI team if academic concerns persist (Reese-Parker Handbook, 2009).

## **Tier Two**

Tier Two provides students with formalized interventions based on the students target area of weakness. During the Tier Two process, RTI team members determine if the problem area requires further assessment and/or if the problem area needs to be defined further incrementally. Once this has occurred, the student is provided intervention(s) in addition to core instruction. Interventions are selected that target the area(s) of concern. The interventionist is determined by the school. In most instances, it is the Early Intervention teacher, another teacher within the school, or a trained paraprofessional. In addition, documentation of the intervention sessions on an Intervention attendance calendar is mandatory. The student receives a minimum of 40 30-minute sessions and the sessions are to be completed within 60 school days

(Reese-Parker Handbook, and 2009).

During implementation, intervention is provided according to the training received regarding the intervention or according to the guidance provided in manual(s) that came with the intervention. Student progress must be monitored weekly. The intervention plan specifies who monitors progress and at what grade level progress will be monitored. Most importantly, the interventionist and the administrator review the data weekly to determine if the student is responding to the intervention. When the student is making progress but, not at an adequate rate or when there is no progress, the administrator convenes a team meeting. Team members prepare for the meeting by analyzing data, analyzing work samples, conducting observations to facilitate discussion regarding the appropriate revisions to the student's intervention plan. If data is inconsistent, the team investigates further to determine a possible explanation. The interventionist can consult with another teacher, the school psychologist, or an administrator. Some discussion points might include the difficulty level of the probes, illnesses, absences, attention, etcetera. It may be helpful to administer three probes and take the median score until the team sees consistent performance (Reese-Parker Handbook, 2009).

Finally, changes may be made to the intervention when it is determined that the intervention first selected is not producing the desired results. There must be a minimum of four data points to consider the effectiveness of the intervention. Then, team members collaborate to determine the appropriate action needed to establish fidelity in the delivery of the intervention. If the student continues to not respond, the team schedules a meeting to discuss moving the student to Tier Three.

### **Tier Three**

Tier Three in Reese-Parker County is SST Driven Learning. In Tier Three, students participate in learning that is different by including intensive, formalized problem solving to identify individual student needs, targeted research-based interventions tailored to individual needs and frequent progress monitoring and analysis of the student response to intervention. The continued purpose of SST is to prevent inappropriate referrals to special education by solving as many problems as possible in the general education setting. As stated in Georgia's RTI Manual, if a student has not had a fair chance to learn in response to solid teaching, it may be premature to fault the student or to suspect a disability (Reese-Parker Handbook, 2009). This is a critical consideration to remedy the problem of disproportionate placement of minority students in special education. The interventionist delivers the intervention according to the intervention plan. Since the student did not respond to Tier One or Tier Two interventions, the plan must reflect a change in intensity, group size, or could be a completely different program (Reese-Parker Handbook, 2009).

### **Research Related to RTI**

In a case study focusing on a survey of administrators and teachers in a mid-size urban school district, participants indicate that RTI components and critical elements were lacking because of decreased leadership, training and teacher buy-in (Dimick, 2009). RTI often has been described as a 'wait-to-fail' model because students must be performing significantly below grade level before they are identified and intense interventions are offered. This model replaced the discrepancy model, which has been the sole means for identifying students with learning disabilities for the past 30 years.

The discrepancy model identifies students with disabilities by comparing their academic achievement to their IQ scores. Fuchs stated that this model has been criticized as an inconsistent and unfair method (2003). RTI appears to be the model of choice for most states. In addition, it appears that since implementation of RTI, special education referrals have decreased in many cases. In a recent publication of the U.S. Department of Education, the Institute of Education Sciences characterized RTI as a comprehensive early detection and prevention strategy that assists struggling students before they fall behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). It assumed that if a student is not responsive to increased levels of intervention, and data supports this, then that student is eligible for additional assistance that may include special education services (Gresham, 2007). However, prior to referral to special education services, students are given various opportunities and interventions to remediate in their area of weakness causing fewer referrals to special education (Gresham, 2007).

Research suggests that the greatest obstacle and advantage of a successful implementation of RTI in schools lies in its implementation. Lose (2008) said the task of implementing and sustaining an RTI initiative is best met by a school's instructional leader, the building principal. A review of the literature on this subject suggests there are several leadership practices and tasks associated with the successful implementation of the RTI process. The concept of RTI has deep roots in that it began with the collaboration for inclusion and collaboration for consultation, which had its focus on a team of professionals to include the special education teacher, general education teacher and support professionals who worked together to design interventions for struggling learners (Spiegel, 2009). Wells (2007), who also found that administrative

support is necessary for successful implementation, studied the effectiveness of Educational Support Teams (ESTs), teams formed for problem solving. The research overwhelmingly supports the idea administrative behaviors will cause RTI to either succeed or fail. In doing so, the referrals to special education may increase or decrease based on administrative leadership. In a study done in Wisconsin, teachers posited that classroom hands-on experience and in-service training are important and should be provided by the instructional leader of the school—the principal (McCutcheon, 2008).

However, in studies done by Rafoth and Foriska (2007), it appears that administrative support and effective teams are not linked directly. They suggested that it is not leadership behaviors that affect drive and effective implementation of RTI; it is the culture of the school that drives a successful implementation. At the least, there is a consensus among all researchers. Leadership does affect RTI whether it has a positive or negative effect. It is clear that the role of the principal in schools has moved from the manager who handles lunch duty and sports event supervision to one of an instructional leader in the building whose effectiveness directly affects students' academic achievement. Chamberlin (2010) stated it best, "school leaders have the job of overseeing an increasingly diverse population, with the responsibility to lead the redesign of their schools in an outcome based accountability era."

In Littmann's (2010) qualitative study, findings revealed two challenges encountered by administrators and district-level personnel. First, administrators felt pressured to put RTI in effect quickly because of the needs of students in the district and new educational policies mandating immediate changes to long-standing practices. Second, logistical obstacles to implementation arose, including scheduling and credits



earned toward graduation of secondary students. While the new RTI model presented difficult challenges, administrators and district-level personnel felt successful having met the district goal for the year and perceived growth on standardized test and a significantly lower numbers of special education referrals.

Additionally, in support of the fact that principal leadership matters is the multiple and cross case analysis study done by Barnhart-Nicholson (2009) where four major findings were revealed: (1) the principal has numerous responsibilities in the implementation of RTI, (2) district leadership matters because district leaders create and support professional development that helps make the RTI process sustainable, (3) schools that function as professional learning communities will easily adopt the RTI process and its implementation, and (4) parents have an indefinable role in the RTI process. They are given little information about the process and they seldom participate in the problem-solving process, which may affect the special education referrals.

In Cutler's (2009) case study, which examined the change process that occurred in relation to the first-year implementation of RTI in a suburban Illinois school district, it was determined that proponents of RTI recognize the many advantages of the strategic intervention that RTI offers. Noted advantages are the use of data to inform decision-making, separating the truly disabled from those who may be weak in certain skill areas, addressing the needs of low-achieving students more quickly, and allowing districts to use federal IDEA funds to provide for the academic support and intervention for all children (Fuchs, Mock, Morgan, & Young, 2003; Batsche, 2005; Cortiella, 2003). With the use of resources that were once reserved for students identified as special education, more students are provided access to the standards-based curriculum.

Bender and Shores (2007) noted that RTI enhances instruction for all children and “teachers are likely to become better equipped to deal with the learning needs of slower learners in the class as well as students with learning disabilities” (p. 97). By being more equipped, teachers may be less likely to refer students to special education.

Conversely, other researchers have argued that RTI has many challenges (Cortiella, 2006; Danielson, Doolittle, & Bradley, 2005; Johnson, Mellard, & Byrd, 2005). When identifying students in the Specific Learning Disability (SLD), there are questions about why some students respond to the standard protocol and others do not. In addition, training staff to adjust instruction adequately, assessment and intensity of intervention within tiers when students are not progressing has posed a challenge (Daly, Martens, Barnett, Witt, & Olson, 2007). Using RTI as a means of support for all children entails major changes in the way districts deliver instruction (Zirkel, 2007). When implemented properly, RTI causes change to happen district-wide. The pivotal area of change centers around teacher practices in what they do for all children in their classrooms. Continual and supported professional development will help districts overcome perceived challenges. Administrators are directly involved with RTI.

Jackson (2010), in her multi-case study where the principal was the case, stated that the principal is responsible for everything that occurs in a building, including the quality of instruction. Spillane, Hallet, and Diamond (2003) defined instructional leadership as “an influence relationship that motivates, enables, and supports teachers’ efforts to learn about and change their instructional practices” (p. 1). Marzano, et al. (2005), synthesizing the work of Smith and Andrews (1989), identified “four dimensions, roles, of an instructional leader: resource provider, instructional resource,

communicator, and visible presence” (p. 18). As the instructional leader who is directing the RTI process, the principal has a direct impact on the efficacy of the process in the school building. Vaughn and Roberts (2007) stated, “An essential component of successful RTI implementation is leadership that is knowledgeable and supportive of the development and implementation of secondary interventions.” The delivery of these interventions directly affects the special education referrals in the building.

### **Summary**

RTI, whether implemented at the national, state or system level, has become an essential part of school communities throughout the nation. Although national guidelines may differ from state and county guidelines, it is the effective implementation that provides the greatest effect on individual students (McCook, 2007). Various researchers have conducted studies outlining, identifying, and researching the significance of RTI in various forms. RTI is a growing part of the decision-making process concerning students. The implementation of RTI may vary from state to state; however, the impact that RTI has on success rate weighs heavily upon the appropriate interventions given to students identified as at-risk before being referred to special education (McCook, 2007).

## **CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

Counties implement the RTI process in various ways. Educational research suggests when given targeted interventions, most students respond and their proficiency level begins to increase (McCook, 2007). Teachers and administrators are required to keep data about how students respond to specific interventions. Therefore, establishing a specific procedure becomes the center of why decisions are made during the RTI process. Further, various counties have established routines that affect student outcomes since the implementation of RTI and it has affected the referral process. The perceptions and ideals of teachers and administrators are relevant to research and will ensure that the RTI process becomes more refined as all stakeholders are working toward increasing student achievement and lessening the misrepresentation of various subgroups unnecessarily.

### **Mixed Methods Research**

This study utilized both qualitative and quantitative data. The concept of collecting and analyzing both forms of data originated in 1959 (Creswell, 2003). Researchers Campbell and Fiske used the qualitative approach to study psychological traits (Creswell, 2003). Comparable to Campbell and Fiske, this study will seek to join data from both quantitative and qualitative means. The results from one method will be used to inform the other method.

### **Statement of the Problem**

RTI is a somewhat new initiative adopted by the state of Georgia. The impact of RTI on the identification of students who qualify for special education is a topic that has

been rarely researched. A lack of research exists regarding the effects of RTI on the identification of students with disabilities before and after the implementation of RTI. Since RTI was also implemented to address the over-representation of minorities in special education (GADOE, 2007), research that assesses the effectiveness of RTI specific to the over-representation of minorities is needed to confirm how RTI has affected this particular subgroup.

Finally, educational administrators and teachers are required to be active participants in the RTI process from the initial stages leading up to the actual referral if needed. Since the implementation of RTI, there has been little research that involves the administrative and teacher perceptions regarding the impact of RTI on special education identification.

### **Purpose of the Study**

RTI has made an impact on the educational setting. In the past, students were eligible for special education based on the discrepancy model. Since the implementation of RTI, research in this area is needed to determine the impact RTI has had on special education referrals. Additionally, RTI was implemented to address the over-representation of minorities in special education. Research is needed so that schools can benefit from specific research to help identify and target interventions for specific minority subgroups if there is an over-representation of minority subgroups at their schools. The study was significant in that it provided research-based data regarding the identification of minorities since the implementation of RTI.

The RTI initiative requires that school administrators are well informed about the mechanisms of RTI and that they be able to create and nurture a climate of change

regarding the RTI process. Administrators manage the building resources, monitor the data, and lead the team in making data-driven decisions. Since RTI is a new imitative, research and reporting in this area is needed. Finally, other administrators and teachers can use the data from this study to generalize to their own populations.

This study assists administrators in determining the impact of RTI on special education identification in their buildings. This awareness allows administrators to schedule interventions and monitor the progress of specific minority subgroups.

Because of the complex nature of RTI, a study that provides both qualitative and quantitative data regarding RTI is needed in the field of educational research. Further, since RTI was established to decrease the number of special education students identified unnecessarily and provide research based interventions to students before the referral process, this study yielded pertinent data that allowed educational administrators access to additional information that will assist them with overseeing the implementation of RTI within their schools. Most importantly, provide them with additional data concerning targeted at-risk students so they are able to schedule RTI interventions appropriately.

## **Research Procedures**

### **Research Questions**

The following overarching question was answered through this study:

To what extent does Response to Intervention influence the practice of the identification of special education students?

In addition, the following sub-questions guide the study.

1. How has the number of students determined eligible for special education

services changed since the implementation of the RTI model?

2. Have the number of minorities determined eligible for special education services changed since the implementation of the RTI model?
3. How do administrators and teachers account for changes in special education identification because of RTI?

### **Research Design**

This qualitative research contained quantitative data from a large suburban county in Georgia regarding referrals three years before implementation of RTI and three years after implementation of RTI. This data was used to obtain information on the impact of RTI on the identification of special education students particularly focusing on minorities. The study had a qualitative section utilizing interviews and focus groups of administrators and teachers representing each grade level in four schools from a suburban Georgia school district.

### **Population**

The subjects for this study were drawn from four elementary schools in a suburban school district in Georgia. The focus groups were comprised of the leadership teams consisting of one to eight teachers selected by the school principal. There was a representative from every grade level in the school. The administrator focus group was comprised of four randomly selected administrators in the school district.

### **Sample**

The study evaluated the number of referrals to special education before and after the implementation of RTI. The study also evaluated the number of minorities deemed eligible for special education services both before and after the implementation of RTI.

Finally, the study evaluated the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding the impact of RTI on special education identification from four randomly selected schools in a suburban school district.

Four administrators were interviewed for this study. Administrators one through four are principals at elementary schools. In addition, each of the administrators had served in their positions for at least six years. The fourth administrator was a middle school principal who was an administrator for at least 10 years. Further, focus groups of teachers from three elementary schools were interviewed. Representatives from each of the Kindergarten through fifth grade levels were present during the interview. One group of middle school representatives was interviewed. Likewise, representatives from grades six through eight participated in the interview.

### **Data Collection**

The quantitative portion of this study utilized data on the impact of RTI on the identification of students with disabilities. The number of special education referrals three years before and three years after the implementation of RTI in the county was used to identify an increase or decrease in the number of special education referrals. In addition, this research was used to identify an increase or decrease in the number of special education referrals for minorities before and after the implementation of RTI. Additionally, interviews were conducted with administrators and teacher focus groups consisting of four administrators and five to eight general education teachers to acquire information about the impact of RTI and special education identification.



## **Data Analysis**

Data from the school district indicating the number of special education referrals from 2005–2006, 2006–2007, and 2007–2008 school years to 2008–2009 and 2009–2010, 2010–2011 school years was analyzed and compared. In addition, data was gathered specific to the number of referrals for minorities before and after the implementation of RTI. Questions were created to determine the perceptions of specific focus group about the effect of RTI.

## **Delimitations**

The population selected for this study was limited to selected elementary school administrators and teachers in one school district in Georgia; thus, the ability to generalize the findings to other counties within other parts of the United States is extremely limited.

## **CHAPTER 4 REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of Response to Intervention on the referral of students to special education and understand the perceptions of teachers and administrators regarding the implementation of RTI in their schools. The data were collected from the interviews and focus groups in the same county. All participants were willing to share information about their experiences with RTI. The interviews and focus group meetings were recorded and transcribed. The researcher-coded passages to determine common themes and patterns and identify when a participant was directly answering one of the research questions that the study was intended to answer. The themes found and other important information the correlated to the research questions are discussed in this chapter.

Finally, the county's referral data relating to the number of minority students referred to special education before and after the implementation of RTI were reviewed and compared. The research was designed to answer the following overarching question: To what extent does Response to Intervention influence the practice of the identification of students to special education?

The sub-questions that guided the study are these:

1. How has the number of special education students determined eligible for special education services changed since the implementation of RTI?
2. Have the number of minorities determined eligible for special education services changed since the implementation of the RTI model?
3. How do administrators and teachers account for changes in special

education identification because of RTI?

Four principals were interviewed from a single suburban county in Georgia for this study. The principals were selected randomly by the researcher. Each principal selected served in the role of principal for a minimum of five years. Each participant was knowledgeable about the RTI process and was able to contribute significant data to the discussions on the subject of RTI.

Four focus group interviews were conducted with three elementary schools and one middle school within the same county. Participants of the elementary focus groups included a teacher from each grade, Kindergarten through fifth grade. The teachers were selected purposefully by their principal. Each participant was knowledgeable about the RTI process and was able to contribute significant data to the discussions on the subject of RTI.

Table 1

*Administrators Demographic Chart*

Administrator Number	School Identification	Years in Education	Position	Gender	Highest degree	Grade level
1	School A	9 Years	Principal	Female	Ed.S.	K-5
2	School B	15 Years	Principal	Female	Ed.S.	K-5
3	School C	20 Years	Principal	Female	Ed.S.	K-5
4	School D	8 Years	Principal	Female	Ed.D	6-8

**Presentation of the Data**

**Building-Level Principal Interviews**

Four building level principals were interviewed to provide answers to the research questions that the study was designed to answer. Each administrator

contributed to the discussions by bringing their own perspective of the RTI process to the interviewing process. Although the overarching question is the opening question in the research proposal, the data regarding the sub-questions will be presented initially. After which, responses from each administrator who answers the overarching question will be reported by the researcher.

**Sub-question 1.** How has the number of students determined eligible for special education services changed since the implementation of RTI? Most administrators indicated that the number of students determined eligible for special education services had declined since the implementation of RTI. Administrator One said, “The process itself has given us time to discover the child’s area of weakness and allow us to target that area to help the child, which leads to the child being successful before ever being referred to special education.” They all agreed that the likelihood of a child being referred has greatly decreased for reason that teachers are able to identify and provide interventions in the area of need. Classroom instruction is driven by the data that is required throughout the RTI process. Most often administrators compared the previous referral process (Student Support Team SST) to the current RTI referral process. Administrator One noted that prior to RTI, students had to struggle for a period before they were tested and a meeting was held to determine whether they were to be referred for special education services and/or diagnostic testing.

Further, administrators identified the current RTI process as a step in the right direction. RTI helped students close achievement gaps in their learning. Students are not allowed to struggle, but are given targeted assessments that identify areas of concerns and provided interventions to address those concerns. They also reported that

a disadvantage of the RTI process is the amount of time it takes to move a student through the process can be extremely long and intensive.

Administrator One commented that at times, the RTI process could slow students down from receiving the help they need for the sake of going through the RTI process. “Sometimes, you know as an educator that a student has a learning issue and needs to be referred to special education, but the student has to remain in the RTI process until there is sufficient data to support the teacher’s hypothesis.”

Administrators believed that strength of the RTI program in schools is that the effective implementation of RTI definitely helps students. Administrator One said, “It remediates students by meeting them where they are in whatever skill area they are deficient in.” Administrator One also mentioned that a weakness of the RTI program at her school is that when students are two or more grade levels behind, it becomes important to move the student through the tiers quickly. However, the process requires time and implementation of strategies, which can sometimes be a long process.

Administrator Two believed the process of identification has slowed down tremendously since the implementation of RTI. “Before, I felt like we were quicker to try to get a child into special education.” Most administrators shared that the RTI process allows the RTI team and/or teacher to see where weaknesses exist. Educators are not so quick to say that children need to be referred to special education. Throughout the process, the continuous efforts to close the achievement gaps usually work and students are not placed into special education.

After roughly comparing the number of referrals to the referrals the previous year at School B, Administrator Two also commented that the number of referrals to special

education declined over the last two years. Previously, School B averaged about five referrals to special education per year. However, since the implementation of RTI, School B averaged one to two referrals a year. The placement or referral is something that is taken very seriously at School B. Administrator One referred to the high risk population that is served at School B. School B is a Title I school and 56% of the student population receive free and reduced lunch. For that reason, students do not always come to School B with the same background knowledge that students might have in a zone with higher socioeconomic status children. In School B, many parents are working two or three jobs and still not able to make ends meet. This factor greatly influences the background knowledge that students have when they come to school. Further, it also influences the amount of parental support that students receive for assignments that are sent home. All of these reasons combined causes the school's RTI team to work to build background knowledge with the students and work extremely diligently to close any gaps in learning before referring to special education. "Since the implementation of RTI, teachers are more likely to differentiate in their classrooms." Teachers have various levels of learning occurring on their classrooms. All administrators believed that because of differentiation in the classroom, teachers are able to meet the needs of the fragile, average, and high learners. "It is basically a three ring circus to the naked eye commented Administrator Two." Further, Administrator Two believed her assistant principal was one of the greatest strengths of the RTI program at her school. The assistant principal has been an administrator for over six years and is very data driven. A weakness of the RTI program is that because of the large number of students on RTI, often, there is limited staff to implement the strategies and

interventions designed for students during RTI team meetings.

Administrator Three shared that School C works very diligently to dissect difficulties that students are experiencing. Teachers meet routinely to have conversations about instructional strategies that work and strategies that do not work. “As a result, we may be able to diagnose the area that the students are struggling in.” Most administrators stated that if students are successful, there is no need to pursue a referral to special education. Although the referrals have declined since the implementation of RTI at School C, there have been problems that have occurred during the process. After receiving interventions, more often than not, students show progress as they are monitored. However, there have been cases that although students are showing progress, they are not able to perform in the classroom at the same rate as their peers. “When progress monitoring data shows improvement and the student is not performing in the classroom, the school must look for ways to help the student before referring to special education commented Administrator Three.” The number of referrals to special education has declined for School C because of the efforts of the RTI team before referring as noted by this administrator.

Administrator Three also noted that the area of math is a concern for School C. Because of lack of interventions for math, teachers do not feel that they have the right resources to help students in math.” This way of thinking and lack of interventions might cause a teacher to want to refer the student to special education for reason that he or she does not have the proper interventions to work with the student in math. Although at times, students are referred to special education services, the placement of a student into special education is not the driving force for the RTI committee. If all strategies

have been tried and the student continues not to make progress, the student is referred to special education for more formal diagnostic testing.

Furthermore, various administrators highlighted the fact that the RTI process appears to assist teachers with developing goals for the students to be more succinct because of the RTI problem solving process before the referral is initiated. Administrator Three commented that the strength for RTI in School C is the problem solving process that occurs before the referral. Communication between parents and teachers is at the core of the RTI process. However, Administrator Three also made note that the number of meetings that must occur according to county policy makes it difficult for teachers to manage various students that are in the RTI process. “Fortunately, we expect to see a reduction in student numbers in the next few years which should result in a reduction in students served through the RTI process.”

All administrators agreed that there had been a decline in the number of special education referrals. Teachers are required to provide research-based interventions before a student can be considered for special education. “In theory, teachers should try all that they can before referring a student to special education,” commented Administrator Three:

School D has only made one referral in the last two years. Differentiation is a key factor in why there haven’t been a large number of referrals. The RTI process requires that teachers work to help students in the classroom. Therefore, fewer students are sent out to receive services, instead the services are brought to the students in their least restrictive environment.

Since the implementation of RTI, more steps in the process of referring students have



been added in the initial phases of the problem solving process. Teachers are required to provide strategies to address deficit areas. “Teachers are well versed on accommodations such as extended time, providing students with a copy of class notes and breaking assignments down into manageable parts; however, there is a need for teachers to be trained better on how to implement research-based interventions in their classrooms.” While the number of referrals has been very limited over the last two years at School D, teachers are providing students with support before they fail. There is limited flexibility in the master and student schedules. This prohibits administration from being able to schedule interventions effectively.

Another major component that contributed to the decrease in special education referrals is data collected on each student throughout the RTI process. Teachers are required to progress-monitor each student who is on a tier in RTI. If the data suggests that the student is doing well, the teacher will continue implementing the strategies or interventions that are working. However, if data indicates that the student is not making progress, the teacher or the interventionist must do something differently to get better results. “Monitoring the student’s progress through data can make or break a student in the RTI process. It provides the teacher with concrete results concerning how the student is responding to the interventions or strategies,” stated Administrator Four.

**Sub-question 2.** Have the number of minorities determined eligible for special education services changed since the implementation of RTI? Administrator One stated that eligibility overall at School A has decreased. School A does not have a large population of minorities so the eligibility rate is consistent with the referral rate in School A. “We identify the problem with students and try to serve them before they have to be

referred and made eligible to special education regardless of their ethnicity.” There has been a steady decline in eligibilities in School A. Administrator One attributed the decrease to the successful implementation of the RTI process at the school level to the dedication of the teachers to serve all children. The number of referrals for monitories at School A has not changed because of the population that School A serves.

Administrator One indicated that during her tenure, the most common eligibilities were white females.

Administrator Two indicated that because of the large population of students with low socioeconomic status served at School B, there is a constant referral rate in terms of minorities. School B has 56% of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Many of the students who are enrolled in School B are behind and in need of academic assistance. However, there has not been an increase in eligibilities of minorities in School B. Administrator Two indicated that their teachers often refer white males. In past years, the eligibility has not changed for that population of students. Although, they are not minorities, white males are the students who are referred and usually become eligible at School B said this administrator.

Most administrators indicated that there had been an overall decline in the number of students made eligible for special education services. “There has not been an increase or decrease in the eligibility of minorities at School C since the implementation of RTI,” commented Administrator Three. Each administrator commented that the problem solving involved in the RTI process allows team members to design specific plans for students to help them to target the students’ weak area. For that reason, learning issues are resolved and it does not lead to a referral, which can

lead to eligibility in special education. The students who fall into minority groups have not shown an increase or decrease in eligibility at School C. “The number of minorities determined eligible has not changed at School C since the implementation of RTI,” said Administrator Three.

Administrator Four shared that although she works in a school that is highly populated in terms of students, there are very few minorities in School D. Administrator Four shared that being in a large school makes it difficult to progress-monitor all of the students who are in the RTI process. All administrators agreed that progress monitoring is a necessary tool that prevents any student from being referred to special education prematurely. Administrator Four stated, “School D has only made one referral to special education in the last two years.” The student that was referred and determined eligible was a white female. After reflecting, Administrator Four mentioned that there has not been an increase or change in the number of minority students made eligible for special education in School D.

**Sub-question 3.** How do administrators and teachers account for changes in special education identification because of RTI?. Several administrators commented that changes in the referral and identification rate could be accounted for because of the early intervention that occurs before a student is made eligible for special education services. Previously, a team met and discussed what students were doing in the classroom and whether they were improving or not. There was never any formal intervention or research-based strategy provided for the student. Administrator Two stated:

By integrating this piece into the RTI process, changes began to occur. In fact,

before our county adopts an intervention, they make certain that the intervention is research-based and has been proven to work with students in the specific areas that we are targeting during the RTI process.

Administrator Two commented that the changes in the referral rate at School B are a direct result of teachers using data to drive their interventions and instruction. The RTI coordinator at School B is very data-driven and requires teachers to progress-monitor how students are responding to interventions. As a result, identifying students as special needs has decreased because the teachers and the team are more apt to notice a decline in the student's response to an intervention since they are monitoring them more frequently. "Progress monitoring was not a part of the process before RTI. Teams simply met to discuss how each representative felt the student was doing," said Administrator Two. The change in special identification comes from the changes the system and school established before students are referred. The level of differentiation and support that occurs before special education identification has heightened the awareness of teachers. Further, data collection has greatly contributed to the decrease and/or change in special education identification because of RTI, stated Administrator Two

Administrators remarked that teachers are having more dialogue about instructional strategies that help meet the needs of all students. Because of these conversations, students are benefiting in their classrooms. The assessment piece is the driving factor in why special education identification has changed since the implementation of RTI. Teachers are forced to assess students more frequently and this causes them to adjust their instruction. "This adjustment of instruction, allows teachers

to meet each student where they are in terms of their learning and work with them to help them to master the standards,” commented Administrator Two. Once this occurs, the success rate of all students increases and thus, leads to fewer students being unnecessarily identified as having a disability.

Administrators affirmed that the change and shift in the way teachers think about students who are struggling has changed since the implementation of RTI. “Teachers know now that special education identification happens after they have tried various things in their classrooms.” This thinking has caused teachers to develop innovative ways to help students in the classroom. Teachers are thinking outside of the box. They are not looking for a way to get students out of the classrooms, but looking for a way to keep them in their classrooms with their peers. RTI forces teachers to implement strategies and interventions in their own classrooms because the struggling student is no longer sent somewhere else to receive his or her classroom instruction. The paradigm shift in the thinking of classroom teachers and administrators because of RTI accounts for the changes in special education identification, said Administrator Four.

## **Summary**

Overarching question. To what extent does RTI influence the practice of the identification of special education students? All administrators commented that RTI has greatly influenced the practice of the identification of special education students. The RTI process requires teachers to provide students with strategic interventions and focused research-based strategies, which directly correlate to fewer students being identified as having a disability. More often than not, students respond to the interventions and a referral to special education is not needed. The interventions lead to

the student being successful in the general education classroom. “The practice of identifying students with disabilities has become more refined as a result of RTI,” said Administrator One. The RTI process influences the practice of identification by requiring that students be provided with research-based interventions before a referral can be made to special education.

Administrator Two said, “before RTI, we were quicker to identify students as having a disability once we realized that the student was significantly struggling.” The RTI process requires that schools identify the student’s specific area of weakness and work to close the achievement gap before identifying the student as having a disability. Administrator Two commented that once the students are provided interventions and targeted strategies, “time and time again, there is not a need to place a special education label on the student.”

Every administrator acknowledged that the RTI process has had a significant impact on the identification of special education students. “Although placing a student into special education is not the driving force behind the RTI process, the process very rarely leads to the team identifying a student as a having a disability,” stated Administrator Three. Commonly, administrators referred to the fact that teachers are more aware of students’ issues as they go through the problem solving process outlined in the RTI procedures. However, if strategies and interventions are implemented and the student is not making adequate progress, the team will make a special education referral, which may lead to special education identification. Because of the aforementioned RTI has influenced special education identification by reducing the number of students being referred to special education. Therefore, students who

otherwise would have been identified as having a disability are remediated through the RTI process.

Administrators agreed that since teachers are required to provide research-based interventions to students during the RTI process, it has greatly decreased the number of students who have been referred to special education. The influence of RTI on special education identification has caused the number of students identified to decline, said Administrator Four. The goal of RTI is to prevent the mis-identification of students to special education. The number of referrals that lead to identification of students with disabilities has decreased. This administrator believes this is a direct result of the influence of the RTI process. Moreover, the mandate to intervene before referring has affected identification greatly as well.

Finally, administrators confirmed that there is often limited flexibility in their master schedules to schedule interventions appropriately. Because of the limited flexibility, it can become a cumbersome task getting students the interventions that they need. We are forced to stretch our staff as far as they can go, commented all administrators. Teachers often are forced to assess students more frequently, which causes them to adjust their instruction. As a result, they develop more innovative ways to help students in their classrooms. Further, administrators unanimously agreed that parental communication is an integral part of the RTI process. By communicating with parents, schools are able to involve the parents in their child's academic success and shortcomings. The RTI process has affected administrators and teachers in ways that are different at each school. However, student success is the centerpiece of research-based intervention, classroom teaching, and parent communication. Administrators

agreed, it takes success in all of these areas for the RTI process to be successful.

Table 2

*Focus Group School A Demographic Chart*

School Identification	Years in Education	Position	Gender	Highest degree	Grade level
School A	10 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	Ed.S.	Kindergarten
School A	11 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	B.S.Ed	First
School A	24 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	Masters	Second
School A	20 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	Ed.S.	Third
School A	16 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	Masters	Fourth

Table 3

*Focus Group School B Demographic Chart*

School Identification	Years in Education	Position	Gender	Highest degree	Grade level
School B	12 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	Ed.S.	Kindergarten
School B	20 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	B.S.Ed	First
School B	8 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	Ed.S.	Second
School B	25 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	M.Ed	Third
School B	4 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	Ed.S.	Fourth
School B	9 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	M.Ed	Fifth



Table 4

Focus Group School C Demographic Chart

School Identification	Years in Education	Position	Gender	Highest degree	Grade level
School C	14 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	M.Ed	Kindergarten
School C	27 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	Ed.S	First
School C	9 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	M.Ed	Second
School C	7 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	M.Ed	Third
School C	28 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	Ed.S.	Fourth
School C	13 Years	K-5 Teacher	Female	Ed.S.	Fifth

Table 5

*Focus Group School D Demographic Chart*

School Identification	Years in Education	Position	Gender	Highest degree	Grade level
School D	9 Years	6-8 Teacher	Female	Ed.S	Sixth
School D	19 Years	6-8 Teacher	Male	Ed.S	Seventh
School D	9 Years	6-8 Teacher	Female	M.Ed	Eighth
School D	13 Years	6-8 Teacher	Female	B.S.Ed	Sixth
School D	5 Years	6-8 Teacher	Female	B.S.Ed	Seventh
School D	16 Years	6-8 Teacher	Female	M.Ed	Eighth

### **Focus Group Data**

Focus groups were held to acquire the perspectives of teachers representing each grade level at each school. The interviews took place in the conference room of each school. The participants willingly participated in the focus group interview. Each of the four focus groups consisted of teachers from each grade level within the school.

Each group contained teachers who worked in the schools before and after the implementation of RTI.

### **Focus Groups A-D**

#### **Sub-question 1: How has the number of students determined eligible for special education services changed since the implementation of RTI?**

The Kindergarten representative from school A indicated that the number of students eligible for special education had not declined since the implementation of RTI due to extensive assessments are completed in Kindergarten. Many of the activities and resources used in the Kindergarten classroom help to strengthen deficient areas that students may have when they come to Kindergarten. The representative commented that it is very rare that students are identified in Kindergarten. Therefore, “there has not been a decline since the implementation of RTI.” Further, second grade representatives from all three elementary schools stated that the number of students who were determined eligible for special education has declined significantly. The representatives commented that the RTI process is a long process, but it gives the student time to respond to interventions and strategies. This factor alone has caused a decrease in the number of students made eligible since the implementation of RTI, stated the second grade representative. The Third Grade representatives commented that once students move through the tiers, the intensity of the interventions cause students to respond. As a result, fewer students are referred to special education. By fewer students being referred, there is a natural decline in the number of students made eligible.

First grade representatives from two schools indicated that the number of students eligible for special education has declined since the implementation of RTI. “It

is very difficult to move a student through the tiers.” All First grade teachers agreed that they are met with resistance when their professional judgment is leading us to believe that the student has a disability stated the teacher.” As a result, fewer students are determined eligible for special education. “It is not necessarily that they are not out there, it is just that teachers get frustrated with the RTI process, and just work with the student in the classroom instead commented the teacher.”

Most representatives from School B stated that the amount of data that teachers have to collect directly impacts the number of students eligible for special education. “We are told what intervention to give and what strategies that we should use, however, once we do that, it is still very difficult to get a student the help that he or she might need.” Because of the process, fewer students are referred and the number of students who are eligible for special education services significantly decreased, stated the fifth grade representative.

A second grade representative commented that each time there is a meeting on a student who is on an RTI tier, the team usually leaves with the recommendation to continue using the intervention or implementing the current strategy. “Very rarely, does a meeting end in a referral to special education. Before RTI, if we met a few times and the student continued to decline, the student would be referred for further testing.” The testing usually led to eligibility. Since the implementation of the RTI process, the exact opposite occurs when a student is struggling.

Representatives from School C indicated that the number of students determined eligible for special education had declined since the implementation of RTI. The teachers commented that it is so difficult to move students through the tiers, which lead

teachers to a high level of frustration. Consequently, teachers choose to work with the student using the resources that they have in their classrooms. "I think the fact that the number of students determined eligible for special education has declined is not necessarily a good thing," stated the fifth grade representative. "There are many students that need to be made eligible, but can't because the process is so convoluted with paperwork stated the teacher." Some teachers acknowledged that RTI has often hindered students and prevented them from becoming eligible to receive special education services. "Last year, I had a student that was on Tier Two for two years. It took an entire year for me to move that student to a Tier Three stated a teacher from School C." The student struggled in academic areas as early as the first grade. However, the teacher acknowledged that the issues students have prior to being placed on RTI are never factored into the decision-making process. Therefore, there is a decline in the number of students being made eligible. However, the teacher acknowledged her thoughts about the reason there is a decline. "It is virtually impossible to get a student services these days." Students are often lost in the process so they do not ever successfully come through the tiers, which cause a decrease in eligibilities, acknowledged various teachers.

The sixth grade representative from School D commented that some of the students who come to middle school have had very little intervention prior to middle school. "Those students are usually able to be placed on the inclusion teams commented the representative." The middle school teachers agreed that the testing that took place in the elementary school follows the students and the middle school teams are able to pick up where the elementary school left off. The representative indicated,

“the smooth transition is the beauty of the RTI process.” However, there has been a growing concern about students who transfer to middle school from other states. The transition is not as seamless because it is sometimes very difficult to get the records and data that is necessary to serve the students, commented the entire group of teachers. “Many times we have to start over remediating the student just by our school based assessments commented the seventh grade representative.” All of these factors contribute to the number of students determined eligible for special education, agreed the teachers. In my opinion, if we are able to effectively continue the remediation once the student gets to middle school, there will be no need to refer the student to special education and the numbers decline stated the sixth grade representative.”

Another representative from eight grade commented that she had a very similar experience with a student who transferred from out of state. The teacher immediately was able to tell that the student had learning problems, but was unable to intervene appropriately because the records were never sent to the school. The student eventually moved on to ninth grade and was not referred or made eligible for special education. Various teachers agreed that one major reason for the decline in referrals is that when students come to middle school from outside of the county, it is difficult to get specific records that record any type of intervention that they may have had. This slows down the process and prevents students from being referred, commented the teacher. “If students are not referred, they cannot be made eligible stated the representative.”

**Sub-question 2: How has the number of minorities determined eligible for special education services declined since the implementation of RTI model?**

The Kindergarten representative stated that School A has a low number of

minorities in the general population. However, RTI has presented an overall decline in students made eligible for special education. “Although, typically students come to the school with few gaps in their learning, as the economy changes, our student population changes as well. Parents have to work and have less time to dedicate to helping their children at home.” Further, teachers agreed that the amount of data that teachers are expected to have once a student is monitored in the RTI process weeds out in appropriate special education identification.

The third grade representative spoke about the number of minorities that have been identified since she has been teaching at School A. Throughout her tenure, she personally has referred only one minority student for special education. That particular student was made eligible for special education services. Although there has not been a decline, stated the third grade representative, the RTI process requires students to be given assessments and provided interventions before referring the student to special education. “This alone decreases the probability that any student will be referred to special education. The majority of the students respond to the interventions which is what we want to happen during the process.”

The first grade representative acknowledged that minorities have been at the core of the RTI process. However, at School A, they are not the majority. Therefore, there would not be an increase or decrease in the number of minorities made eligible for special education. “A large number of our students are white students. As I reflect on the students that have been made eligible, they have been mostly white males. “The decline has been with the white students stated the first grade teacher.”

The Kindergarten representative at School B spoke about the difference in the

number of minority students who have been referred to special education since the implementation of RTI. “Most of the students are already in special education before entering the school. Teachers are already aware that they have a disability. They usually get services from outside agencies before they start school.” Over the course of the last few years, School B has only had one minority student to be determined eligible for special education. Further, many Kindergarten students who enrolled in School B were already in special education were white males.

Most third grade representatives answered the research question by commenting that since there are a high number of students who are in need of assistance, third grade teachers always differentiate instruction in their classrooms. “There is a great deal of flexible grouping and supplementing in all lessons.” Teachers at School B make instruction high priority to meet the needs of every student. Therefore, the number of minorities and all other students referred has declined since the implementation of RTI. Teachers are able to adjust instruction and group students based on their achievement level. Once their level is established, teachers work diligently to close any gaps in their learning. This process often eliminates the need for a referral. Therefore, minorities and/or other students end up getting the help they need. There has been a decline in the number of minority students determined eligible for special education along with a decline in all other subgroups stated the third grade representative.

The third grade representative at School C responded to the question by stating that if a minority parent is an advocate for his or her child that the child might be less likely to be made eligible for special education. Likewise, if that same parent wants the child to receive services, the student is more likely to be determined eligible for special

education services, commented the representative. The Third grade teachers agreed that although the number of overall students to include minorities declined since the implementation of RTI, that number may be skewed because of the longevity of the process. "Students are just not referred that much anymore:

I do not think that there is a particular subgroup that has benefited from RTI stated the third grade teacher. Most students that need to be eligible for services are not brought to the table because teachers are met with resistance when trying to get a student eligible to receive services according to the third grade representative.

The fifth grade representative stated that there has not been a change in the number of minorities that have been determined eligible for special education services. However, the representative acknowledged that the lack of parental notification in the process might contribute to the decline in eligibilities. The previous SST process required that parents be a part of the decision-making process. The RTI process does not involve the parent in the process until the student has reached Tier Three. Since the parents are not notified, they are less likely to understand what is occurring in the process. Therefore, they do not advocate for the eligibility, which contributes to the decline in eligibilities since the implementation of RTI to include minority students.

Sixth grade representatives responded to the question by saying that referrals in all grade levels have declined since the implementation of RTI. "I cannot say that the number of minorities determined eligible has increased. Our county is not heavily populated with minorities so the majority of the referrals and eligibilities that I have seen have been for white males and females." The representative pointed out that the length



of time that it takes to move students through the tiers impacts whether or not minorities or non-minorities are referred to special education.” It often takes at least a year to move students through the tiers, agreed the teachers. Because of the time factor, teachers agreed that either students are remediated or they just stay lost in the process.

All of the representatives on the team indicated that the minority subgroup is a small percentage at School D. Therefore, by default, the number of minorities determined eligible for special education since the implementation of RTI should be consistent with the referral data from previous years. The RTI process allows teachers to get more of a feel of where the students are academically. Teachers are able to target specific areas of weaknesses that students may have. Consequently, referrals decrease and fewer students are referred to special education in general. This includes the minority subgroups.

**Sub-question 3: How do teachers account for changes in special education identification because of RTI?**

A Kindergarten representative commented that before the RTI process was implemented, teachers in her grade level would focus on a specific student who was on SST. Since the implementation of RTI, Kindergarten teachers have worked to break students up into groups and focus on the needs of all students at their level. “By working with students on their level, we are able to fill in the achievement gaps so students do not have to be identified as having a disability stated the Kindergarten teacher.”

Most second grade representatives agreed that the changes that have occurred regarding special education identification are a direct result of how teachers assess students at the beginning of the year. “The assessment gives you an indication of any

weaknesses that students may have at the beginning of the year.” You can begin to target those areas immediately and monitor the progress of the students. The second grade representative commented that as a result, students are provided immediate assistance, which leads to changes in the number students identified as having a disability.

The third grade representative affirmed that changes in special education are a result of the information that the teachers are able to gather at the beginning of the year. “The diagnostic testing gives us the information that we can use.” Once it is available, we immediately begin to plan instructional activities to help bring the students up to grade level. “By forming groups, teachers are able to work with low, average, and high students.” Grouping students has been a direct result of the mandate of RTI. This grouping allows teachers to work with at risk students so that they do not need to be referred to special education unnecessarily. The third grade representative also mentioned that RTI has changed her understanding of the reasons why students struggle. RTI has helped her to understand exactly what to focus on with each student. “I am able to pinpoint and target the area of weakness and I don’t have to refer a student to special education if they respond appropriately to my instruction in the classroom.”

The team of teachers acknowledged that since the implementation of RTI, there has been a significant change in the way that instruction is delivered, which results in a change in the number of students who are identified as having a disability. “RTI requires continuous assessments.” The assessments lead to teachers searching for innovative ways to reach every student. Before RTI, if students struggled, they would be sent out

of the general education setting and someone else would work with the student. Since RTI, “we are required to do the work.” Most teachers view it as a challenge but put forth all their efforts into closing the gaps so that the student does not have to be referred unnecessarily.

In fifth grade at School B, there has been a great change in the way teachers deliver instruction, which causes the number of students who are identified to decrease. Students respond to the instructional strategies that teachers now implement in the classroom, stated the fifth grade representative. In addition, the curriculum used at School B allows classroom time to address the needs of specific students in addition to core instruction. During this time, students who need intervention can be pulled out and students who do not necessarily need a specific intervention but are struggling, benefit from intense small group instruction during this time. “In the past, there was not a time that students could be pulled and not miss core instruction.” This is essential to the change in special education identification because we have the opportunity to work with students that are struggling in the classroom. They receive small group instruction in the classroom in addition to their core instruction.” This strategy has affected the change in the number of students that have been identified as students with a disability.

In third grade, there has been a very huge decrease in teachers venturing out to try different strategies to help students, which has caused a change in classroom instruction:

The program implemented in School B is such a prescriptive program that it takes the teacher’s opinion away about the difficulties that students are experiencing. This directly contributes to the changes in special education

identification in that the prescriptive lessons are so precise that students generally respond to the instruction and intervention and are not referred. This is tremendously different from the way things happened during the SST process.

Most Kindergarten representatives stated that changes in special education with regard to Kindergarten and special education identification are minimal. However, it has increased the workload of the teacher because teachers must plan various lessons for students within their classrooms. "There are times when I have to go to my colleagues and seek their help because I am required to do so many things in one lesson. I do realize that the students benefit from the extra work." The collaboration requirement of RTI contributes to the change in special education identification. Teachers collaborate and share lessons and strategies. In return, students benefit and there is normally not a need to identify a student as a student with a disability.

The second grade representative at School C commented that the changes in special education identification have a direct correlation with the way the classroom instruction has changed since the implementation of RTI. "Since the implementation of RTI, we have our paraprofessionals delivering interventions and working as instructional leaders in the classroom. We have the responsibility of working with students to close their gaps." This process is so effective that it has helped to lower the number of students identified as having disability." This change has continued to become more dramatic over the years, according to the second grade representative.

All teachers indicated that changes in special education identification have been impacted significantly by the classroom assessments required. Teachers must adjust instruction based on the ability of the students in the classroom. Since, teachers are

constantly assessing and adjusting, any weakness that a student has is identified and addressed before the student is labeled as having a disability according to the third grade representative. "We often assess and change our groups in the middle of a unit or even nine weeks commented a second grade teacher." This adjustment is critical because teachers are able to meet the needs of all students to include struggling learners, which are often the students that may eventually be determined eligible for special education services. The changes in special education are influenced greatly by the assessment and level of intense instruction occurring in an assessment-driven classroom according to the third grade representative.

Middle school teachers acknowledged that the changes in special education identification are influenced greatly by the various ways that teachers have to present the materials to the different levels of students. "Students that have learning issues are often placed into the general education classes before they have the opportunity to be referred to special education classes stated a sixth grade teacher." More often than not, teachers are able to reach these students academically and there is not a need for the student to be identified as a special education student, commented the entire team of teachers. The teacher also mentioned that in addition to teaching, by students being around other students who are learning, they are able to learn from their peers. This factor influences the changes in special education because the students often are able to help struggling students before they are referred to special education, commented the eighth grade representative.

The seventh grade representative had a slightly different perspective. The representative commented that parents often push for students not to be referred to

special education while they are in elementary school and once the students get to middle school and they begin to struggle, the parents begin to push again to get the students referred. “The parent involvement accounts for some of the changes in special education identification stated the seventh grade teacher.” Parents are key stakeholders in the RTI process. Their opinions are factored into whether the students are referred to special education.

### **Summary**

**Overarching question: To what extent does Response to Intervention influence the practice of special education identification?**

Elementary representatives commented that since the goal of RTI is to keep students in the classroom, that theory directly influences the practice of special education identification. Teachers work together to provide students with what they need to be successful rather than automatically assuming that the student needs to be identified as a student with special needs. The third grade teachers noted that the intense instruction that occurs at Tier One allows teachers to deliver intense strategies and scale back as needed. “By fostering strong Tier One instruction, we are able to chart the student’s progress commented the third grade teacher”. This progress monitoring directly influences whether or not a student is referred and identified as a student with a disability. If Tier One is working, we keep doing what we are doing. If not, we look at special education as a last resort.”

First grade teachers stated that teachers have been slightly frustrated with the way that RTI has influenced special education identification. Because of the amount of data and interventions that teachers are required to have, students often are not

referred. “The extreme amount of data and work required from teachers influences them. We just make attempts do the best that they can with the students.” In addition, the first grade teacher shared that many times the data shows growth in targeted areas on paper, but the students cannot keep up with the pacing in the classroom. This is another major influence of RTI that directly impacts special education identification.” If the student is showing growth on paper, it is highly unlikely that there will be data to support special education identification, explained the representative.

The second grade representative at School B acknowledged that teachers are often forced to go an alternative route to get students into special education because of the RTI process. “We have had to pursue 504 plans for students that just could not make it through the RTI process, but obviously needed something more than what we could provide them with.” The RTI process causes teachers to reach out in desperation because they are unable to get help in the RTI process. The entire group of teachers nodded their heads in agreement with the statement that the second grade teacher made. The group agreed that the entire RTI process has influenced special education identification. However, there are advantages and disadvantages to the RTI process. The advantage is that students are not identified needlessly as having a disability and given a label when it is not necessary according to all of the teachers. One disadvantage is that it is very difficult to move students through the process, which leads to special education identification. This is a direct result of the heavy influence of RTI protocol in the decision-making process.

Most teachers at School C affirmed that Tier One is for every student except the student who is struggling. Tier One requires that the teacher do something different for

the students who are having difficulties. Teachers often spend large amounts of time preparing lessons, which helps students that would otherwise struggle in the classroom. “RTI has influenced the teaching and the way that we go about identifying students who have a disability said the fourth grade representative.” The RTI process gives teachers little room for error or unnecessarily identifying a student who does not have a disability. Teachers at School C commented that the assessments given during the RTI process influence the practice of special education identification in that teachers are required to collect data and monitor the students’ progress before the student can be identified as having a disability. In the past, teachers would implement common strategies such as: one-to-one assistance, reducing work and altering tests. However, since the implementation of RTI, students must be involved in an intervention that specifically targets the students’ area of weakness. Once placed in the intervention, students either respond or not. If they do not respond, the data influences and aides in the identification of the student as a student with a disability according to the consensus of the entire focus group.

Middle school representatives acknowledged that RTI has greatly influenced the way teachers teach all students. RTI forces teachers to differentiate their instruction so that each child in the classroom can receive what he or she needs and master the standards being taught. “RTI makes teachers think about those fragile learners and implement strategies to help them to be successful in the classroom.” Most students respond to the instruction in some way which influences the practice of special education identification.” “If students respond to the instruction in the classrooms, they are often not identified as special education students but are given to tools that they



need to be successful and taught how to apply them in every classroom,” commented the seventh grade representative.

Another sixth grade representative commented that as the inclusion teacher, RTI has influenced special education identification in a tremendous way in her opinion. “The special education teacher comes in my classroom and works with all students to include the students that are struggling.” The practice of inclusion alone reaches struggling learners. In the past, students were pulled out to receive instruction, but since the implementation of RTI, it is not uncommon to see the fragile learners in the same classes as the other students:

RTI makes teachers become masters at differentiation and scaffolding their instruction. As teachers, we never want to lose a child due to lack of exposure and lack of differentiation in the classroom. We want to reach them and many times, we do. Our instruction in the classroom because of RTI is what makes the largest difference in the referrals to special education.

Finally, all teachers acknowledged that RTI has advantages and disadvantages and has influenced special education identification in some way. Elementary teachers noted that RTI has caused teachers to become frustrated because at times, the RTI process does not get students the help they need quickly. In addition, teachers confirmed that they are met with resistance when trying to refer a student to special education. They agreed that such resistance has caused them to remain silent in terms of referring a student to special education or just work with the child in the classroom by delivering the student with the best, but not always appropriate instruction that they can.

The chart below represents the number of students referred prior to and after the

implementation of RTI. Further, the chart demonstrates the number of minorities referred three years prior and after the implementation of RTI.

Table 6: Students Referred to Special Education Services

Pre RTI Referrals			Minority	Pre RTI	Post RTI Referrals			Minority	Post RTI
			Students	Referrals				Students	Referrals
2005/ 2006	2006/ 2007	2007/ 2008	2005/ 2008	2005/ 2008	2008/ 2009	2009/ 2010	2010/ 2011	2008/ 2011	2008/ 2011
123	124	104	<b>75=21%</b>	351	89	138	143	<b>53=14%</b>	370

### Themes of the Study

This section is divided into two parts to answer the research questions that guided the study. The first part examines principals' perceptions about the RTI process and its effect of the identification of special education students because of the implementation of RTI. The second part of the study focuses on teacher perceptions of the RTI process and the impact RTI has had on teaching and the identification of special education students since the implementation of RTI.

### Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the major findings of the study. The chapter began by providing an overview of the research study. The next section described the respondents in the study. The focus groups and interviews were shared as they related to the research questions addressed in the study. Finally, the major themes found in the data were discussed as they related to the research questions.

The overarching question involved the discussion regarding to what extent RTI influences the practice of special education identification. Principals agreed that RTI had

a major impact on special education identification in that it requires that schools and teachers to look at data and schedule interventions before referring a student to special education. In addition, administrators believed that RTI has had a positive influence on classroom instruction. RTI requires that teachers work with the struggling students in the classroom before referring the student to special education.

The first research question dealt with the number of students determined eligible for special education since the implementation of RTI. The data collected from the interviews and focus groups revealed that principals and teachers agreed that the number of students determined eligible declined since the implementation of RTI. Administrators and teachers agreed that early intervention and targeted instruction contributed to fewer students being made eligible for special education.

The second research question addressed the number of minorities determined eligible for special education since the implementation of RTI. Teachers and administrators all agreed that the number of minorities determined eligible has not changed since the implementation of RTI although the overall number of students being referred to special education declined. The county in which the study was performed had a low number of minorities, which contributed to the findings regarding the eligibility of minorities. The students who were made eligible for special education were primarily white males and females.

The third research question explored how administrators and teachers account for the changes in special education identification. Administrators believed the change was because of the targeted interventions being provided to the students and the early intervention that the students receive before being referred to special education.

However, teachers expressed that the changes in special education identification are a direct result of the differentiation that occurs in the classroom. The fragile learners are placed in their classrooms and RTI has forced them to provide instructional strategies to support those students. Most teachers agreed that the students generally respond to the instruction and there is no need for a referral. Teachers stated that before RTI, students who needed additional help were pulled out of the classroom and another teacher worked with those students. Since the implementation of RTI, the opposite occurs. Students strongly benefit from grade level differentiation of instruction, which accounts for the changes in special education.

#### **Part I- Principal's Perceptions of the Effects of RTI**

1. Principals consider the RTI process as a comprehensive process designed to promote students being placed in the general education setting.
2. Principals agreed that since the RTI process requires teachers to use targeted interventions, fewer students have been referred to special education because most students respond to the targeted interventions.
3. Principals consider the length of time that students have to remain in the RTI process as an area of concern that should be corrected to help students that need to be moved through the tiers more quickly.
4. Principals believe the number of referrals for minorities has not changed since the implementation of RTI.
5. Principals indicated that teachers have changed their teaching by varying teaching strategies to address all learners since the implementation of RTI.
6. Principals agreed that students are moved through the RTI process when

necessary and the process does prevent students from being referred to special education unnecessarily.

7. Principals agreed that the RTI problem solving process has helped teachers and administrators discover specific areas of weaknesses of students, which in turn allows the teachers to develop strategies and provide specific interventions designed to target those specific areas.

## **Part II- Teacher's Perceptions of the Effects of RTI**

The results of the interviews with the teacher manifested into ten common themes related to this study. They are as follows:

1. Teachers agreed that they have greater responsibilities since the implementation of RTI.
2. Teachers acknowledged that students that are struggling are identified as at-risk earlier since the implementation of RTI,
3. Teachers expressed that RTI has caused them to differentiate instruction in their classrooms so that all students have access to the curriculum,
4. Teachers indicated that while RTI remediates some students and prolongs the inevitable for others,
5. Teachers agreed that there have been fewer referrals of students to special education because of RTI,
6. Teachers agreed that the number of minorities referred to special education has remained the same since the implementation of RTI,
7. Teachers acknowledged that since the implementation of RTI that the teacher judgment has been removed from the referral process and replaced with data,

8. Teachers agreed that there are times that students are not moved through the tiers because of the requirements mandated by RTI,
9. The consensus of teachers was that it is highly unlikely that students move quickly through the tiers based on teacher observations and classroom assessments only, and
10. Teachers confirmed that parental involvement is an important factor in the decision-making process of RTI.

## **Chapter 5**

### **SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS**

This chapter presents a summary of the study and discussion of the findings. In addition, presented are the conclusions drawn from the data analysis, implications for research, theory and practice, and recommendations for future research.

#### **Summary of the Study**

A qualitative research design was selected for this study because it allowed for the perceptions of teachers and administrators to be researched and provided data to support whether or not the implementation of RTI affected instructional practices and the number of referrals to special education. Four building level principals were interviewed for this study. Four focus groups of teachers consisting of teachers who represented Kindergarten through fifth grade from the elementary level. Further, one middle school focus group was interviewed for this study consisting of teachers who represented grade levels six through eight. The group interviews were conducted in the offices of the administrators and the focus group interviews were held in the conference room of each school. Interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes. All interviews were conducted and recorded by the researcher. A contracted transcriber transcribed the interviews. The data were compared for common themes and patterns that were presented in chapter four.

RTI affects instructional strategies and accountability in schools (McCook, 2007). The purpose of this study was to assist administrators in determining the impact of RTI on special education identification in their buildings and to determine the perceptions of teachers regarding the RTI process and special education identification.

The research was designed to answer the following overarching question:

To what extent does Response to Intervention influence the practice of the identification of special education students?

The following sub-questions guided the study:

1. How has the number of students determined eligible for special education services changed since the implementation of the RTI model?
2. Have the number of minorities determined eligible for special education services changed since the implementation of the RTI model?
3. How do administrators and teachers account for changes in special education identification because of RTI?

### **Discussion of the Research Findings**

This section presents a discussion relevant to the major conclusions drawn from this study. The results of this study suggest four conclusions. Each of the findings is discussed in relation to the relevant literature.

#### **Finding 1: Principals agreed that RTI has had a significant impact on special education identification.**

RTI requires that school administrators and teachers look at data and schedule appropriate interventions before referring a student to special education. In her multi-case study where the principal was the case, Jackson (2010), states that the principal is responsible for everything that occurs in a building, including the quality of instruction. In a study by Dupius (2010), it was determined that when administrators and teachers correctly implement the RTI process, special education rates decline and instructional practices change. In addition, principals set expectations in their buildings to ensure that the RTI process is followed correctly. RTI calls for general educators to provide students



with and without disabilities with research-based interventions and monitor their progress regularly to determine growth (Ardoin, 2005). Just as important, teachers must buy in to the process consistently and implement interventions to get valid results.

Principals, as well as teachers in this study felt that the RTI process has affected the number of students being identified and referred to special education. Principals considered the implementation of targeted interventions as an essential component of the tremendous impact on special education identification. Teachers attributed the impact as a direct reflection of the differentiation of instruction that occurs in the classroom. Teachers agreed that in the past, students who had academic difficulties were pulled out of their classrooms and other teachers worked with them. However, RTI requires that teachers differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of all students in the general education classrooms.

**Finding 2: Principals and teachers all agreed that the number of students determined eligible for special education declined since the implementation of RTI.**

However, the data analyzed in the study did not show a significant decrease in special education eligibilities since the implementation of RTI. A study by Brue and Wilmshurst (2006) revealed that if research-based interventions are helpful, special education services might not be needed. Understanding what works best can help teachers provide appropriate instruction to students, which may possibly lead to the student receiving what he or she needs prior to being referred to special education (Brue & Wilmshurst, 2006).

**Finding 3: Principals and teachers all agreed that the number of minority students**

**determined eligible for special education did not increase or decline since the implementation of RTI.**

In a study by Bender and Shores (2007), it was noted that RTI enhances instruction for all children. "Teachers are likely to become better equipped to deal with the learning needs of slower learners, minorities and at risk students in the class as well as students with learning disabilities." By being more equipped, teachers may be less likely to refer students to special education. The targeted intervention provided to minorities and other students who struggle academically during the RTI process supports the data in the study, which shows that there has not been an increase or decrease in the referrals of minority students since the implementation of RTI. Feedback from teachers and administrators confirm that since the county primarily is populated with non-minority students, if there was an increase, it would not be with any minority subgroup. The data from the study indicates a 7% increase in minority eligibilities three years prior and three years' post.

**Finding 4: Principals and teachers all agreed that the changes in special education identification are a direct result of the change in educational expectations of administrators and teachers since the implementation of RTI.**

Administrators agreed that their responsibility to oversee that the RTI process is followed correctly in the school building is linked directly to the changes in special education identification. If administrators allow mediocrity, more students will be identified as having a disability because the teachers may not implement or follow the RTI process with fidelity. Lose (2008) said that the task of implementing and sustaining the RTI initiative is best met by a school's instructional leader, the building principal. A

review of the literature on this subject suggests that there are several leadership practices and tasks associated with the successful implementation of the RTI process.

Further, teachers account for changes in special education identification by the quality instruction that happens in the classroom. Differentiation in the classroom and meeting the needs of the students before they are referred are the main factors between a student being referred or not.

### **Conclusions**

The RTI process has had a significant impact on the way that administrators and teachers respond to students who are struggling academically and behaviorally. Administrators are now required to oversee the RTI process in their buildings and maintain the integrity of the RTI process by monitoring teachers and interventions. Teachers now are expected to intervene at the onset of an academic challenge with students and provide targeted instruction and specific interventions before referring the student to special education. The RTI process was designed to provide early intervention to students who struggle and prevent the over-representation of minorities in special education.

The finding resulted in the following conclusions:

1. Principals consider the RTI process a comprehensive process designed to promote students being placed in their least restrictive environment.
2. Principals consider the length of time that students must remain in the RTI process as an area of concern that should be corrected to help students who need to be moved through the tiers more quickly.
3. Principals indicated that teachers have changed the way they teach by

- varying teaching strategies to address all learners since the implementation of RTI.
4. Principals agreed that students are moved through the RTI process when necessary and the process does prevent students from being referred to special education.
  5. Teachers agreed that they have greater responsibilities since the implementation of RTI.
  6. Teachers acknowledged that students who are struggling are identified as at-risk earlier since the implementation of RTI.
  7. Teachers expressed that RTI has caused them to differentiate instruction in their classrooms so that all students have access to the curriculum, and
  8. Teachers established that the number of minorities referred to special education have continued at the same level since the implementation of RTI.

### **Implications for Research**

This qualitative study on the impact of RTI on special education identification adds to the growing body of research concerning the new RTI initiative. This study examines the perceptions of administrators and teachers about the RTI process. Although the RTI initiative is a new initiative in Georgia, findings from this research bring to light several implications for research, theory and practice in the areas of leadership and teacher implementation of RTI.

The importance of RTI begins with the building-level administrator being an active participant in the process. It is beneficial for principals to have a clear understanding of the RTI process to be sure that the process is implemented effectively.

Further, for principals to provide effective feedback regarding instruction and interventions being provided, principals are expected to be well versed in what is expected at every tier in the RTI process. In addition, teachers must deliver effective instruction to the students who are at-risk in their classrooms. Differentiation should be at the core of every subject since the RTI process requires teachers to assist the struggling student before the student is referred to special education.

This study makes practical contributions to leadership for administrators who are instructional leaders in schools that are involved in the RTI process. Professional development opportunities to increase the effectiveness of instruction in the RTI process and provide training for administrators may help both veteran and new administrators along with teachers determine the impact of RTI on teaching and special education identification in their buildings.

Additionally, in all schools in this study, the RTI process is being implemented by teachers and supervised by building-level principals. Principals stated that the RTI process has caused teachers and administrators to be strategic about referring students to special education. However, teachers expressed the workload was excessive at times in terms of the RTI expectations. These findings indicate a need for more comprehensive training for teachers and administrators both at the state- and county-level. Further, higher learning institutions should include training for future teachers and future administrators on the impact of RTI on teaching strategies and special education identifications. All four principals in this study held strong beliefs about the connection between the RTI process and early intervention. Given these administrators beliefs about the RTI process, further studies should look at the extent of the impact of RTI on

teaching strategies, referrals of minority students and overall special education identification.

This study increases understanding of the RTI process and the requirements that the process places on teachers and administrators. Principals maintained that the RTI process has changed the special education referral process in that fewer students are being referred because they are responding to interventions. Teachers agreed that the RTI process has changed special education referrals because of the differentiation that occurs in the classroom prior to the students being referred to special education.

Based on the findings of this research, various recurring themes were noted by the researcher:

1. Teachers participating in the RTI process must have the correct training on how to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all students.
2. Administrators must be knowledgeable about the RTI process to oversee the correct implementation of the RTI process in their buildings.
3. Decisions regarding special education should be data-driven, but teacher discretion and judgment should remain a part of the RTI process.
4. Higher learning institutions should include formal RTI training for future teachers and administrators.
5. Principals and teachers should be aware that most students will respond to interventions implemented in the RTI process so teams should not rush the referrals of struggling students to special education.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this study suggest recommendations for future research. First, this was an exploratory study to understand the impact of RTI on special education identification. The sample for this study was small because of the size of the county where the study occurred. Additional research is needed to determine if the findings of this study transfer to other cases. Further, only one county from Georgia was included in the study. Future studies might include elementary and middle schools from across the nation to determine if the findings are consistent with the findings in this study.

In addition, further studies should be conducted to determine the level of training needed by teachers and administrators to implement and follow the steps in the RTI process correctly. The relationship between building-level administrators and their involvement in the RTI process with the teacher buy-in to the RTI process was a recurring theme in this study. Further research should be conducted to examine the impact of teacher buy-in to the RTI process based on administrative involvement.

Finally, another study should be conducted to determine the effectiveness of interventions and strategies being implemented by teachers during the RTI process. Data can be drawn from the monitoring system established by the system and administrators.

## **Dissemination and Applications**

The researcher plans to write an article to be published in an educational journal from the findings of this study. This study increases the understanding of administrators and teachers about the RTI process and what takes place before a referral to special education is made. This knowledge may assist other counties, administrators, and

teachers with determining the impact of RTI in their buildings. It will assist them with making the necessary adjustments based on the data from their buildings. Teachers can use the results of the study to obtain a better understanding of what is expected of them from the RTI process and how to intervene early to prevent unnecessary referrals to special education.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter presented a summary of the research study, discussion of the conclusions, implications for research, theory and practice and recommendations for future research.

The data were based on semi-structured interviews with principals and teachers.

Respondents offered their own perspective concerning the impact of RTI.

The findings resulted in the following conclusions:

1. Principals agreed that since the RTI process, fewer students have been referred to special education because of the implementation of RTI.
2. Principals and teachers believe that the number of referrals for minorities has not changed since the implementation of RTI.
3. Administrators and teachers acknowledged that students who are struggling are identified as at-risk earlier since the implementation of RTI.
4. Teachers expressed that RTI has caused them to differentiate instruction in their classrooms so that all students have access to the curriculum.
5. Administrators and teachers acknowledged that the number of referrals of minorities has not changed since the implementation of RTI.

The RTI process was designed to provide early intervention to students who struggled academically before they were referred to special education and to eliminate



the over-representation of minorities in special education. The impact of RTI can be different for various individuals. However, since the implementation of RTI, the way administrators, and teachers respond to students with academic and behavioral differences has changed significantly. The RTI process is most effective when both the administrators and teachers are well versed on what should be occurring during the RTI process. The process will be most successful when all individuals involved in the process are working toward the same common goal, giving every student what they need regardless of race, gender, or environmental factors.

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## APPENDIX A: CHARTS

1.	How many years have you been an educator?
2.	What is your position?
3.	What is your gender?
4.	What is your highest degree?
5.	Please tell which grade level you represent.

*Figure 2. Demographic questionnaire for administrators and teachers*

### Interview Questions

1. Please give a brief description of the RTI program at your school.
2. What have been the greatest benefits of RTI at your school?
3. What problems have resulted from the implementation of RTI?
4. What effect has RTI had on the referral of students to special education?
5. How has teaching different grade levels changed because of RTI?
6. How likely is it that after the implementation of RTI, students will be referred to special education?
7. What changes have you noticed in special education placement since the implementation of RTI?
8. How have general education teachers utilized specific RTI strategies in the classroom?
9. Are there times when students are not moved through the tiers due to an

increase of the workload?
10. What would you do differently if you were a teacher to make RTI successful?
11. What would you do differently if you were the principal to make RTI successful?
12. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the RTI program at your school?
13. Is there anything else about your RTI program that you want to tell me about that I have not asked about already?

Figure 3. Interview questionnaire for administrators and teachers

### Interview Questions

Interview Questions	Related Research Questions
1. Please give a brief description of the RTI program at your school.	Overarching 1, 2
2. What have been the greatest benefits of RTI at your school?	Overarching 1, 2
3. What problems have resulted from the implementation of RTI?	Overarching 1, 2
4. What effect has RTI had on the referral of students to special education?	Overarching 1, 2
5. How has teaching different grade levels changed because of RTI?	4

6. How likely is it that after the implementation of RTI, students will be referred to special education?	Overarching 1, 2,3
7. What changes have you noticed in special education placement since the implementation of RTI?	3,4
8. How have general education teachers utilized specific RTI strategies in the classroom?	4
9. Are their times when students are not moved through the tiers due to an increase of the workload?	Overarching 4
10. What would you do differently if you were a teacher to make RTI successful?	Overarching 4
11. What would you do differently if you were the principal to make RTI successful?	Overarching 4
12. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the RTI program at your school?	Overarching 1, 2
13. Is there anything else about your RTI program that you want to tell me about that I have not asked about already?	Overarching 1, 2

*Figure 4.* Interview questionnaire linked to research questions

Studies Related to RTI

STUDY	PURPOSE	PARTICIPANTS	DESIGN	OUTCOMES
Dupius, 2010	<p>To investigate the following research questions: What are the special education rates over time for the FY 08, 09, and 10 for the elementary schools <math>N = 3</math> that have implemented RTI? What are elementary teachers' perceptions of RTI with Respect to the following dimensions:            Administrative Support, Resources, Level of Implementation, and Student Performance?            How are elementary</p> <p>Teacher perceptions of their involvement in the RTI process associated with their classroom instructional practices?</p>	<p>A population of teachers <math>N = 122</math> from <math>N = 3</math> elementary schools.</p>	<p>Mixed-Methods</p>	<p>Findings of the study suggest when administrative support and resources are provided to teachers when implementing RTI there is a direct correlation to a decrease (2.5%) in special education rates, a change in instructional practices, and an increase in student performance.</p>

STUDY	PURPOSE	PARTICIPANTS	DESIGN	OUTCOMES
Kristin, 2008	To investigate the successes and challenges of the RTI model to better understand the purpose behind the implementation to meet at-risk needs.	Two Southern California elementary school sites.	Qualitative Case Study	1. Findings of the study that principal leadership, teacher buy-in, resources, and professional development positively impacted RTI implementation at the two sites whereas limited district support was seen as an implementation challenge. Finding suggest RTI was implemented similarly at both sites with a few minor differences which was surprising since (1) the schools have diverse populations while NCLB and IDEA's description of RTI is vague, and (2) policy implementation research has shown that local variation exists when implementing a top-down reform policy.

STUDY	PURPOSE	PARTICIPANTS	DESIGN	OUTCOMES
Lay, 2007	To identify the leadership responsibilities needed to implement a Progress Monitoring Model that incorporates a Response to Intervention (RTI) Model for system-wide change in literacy.	200 teachers involved in the RTI implementations completed the survey to provide feedback to their principals.	Qualitative Study	<p>Showed that the principals involved in the RTI initiatives, at all levels of implementation, perceived the implications as having second-order change magnitude.</p> <p>Responses on the McRel's Balanced Leadership Profile 360(TM) survey were varied and their interview responses named; communication, focus, input, knowledge of curriculum, resources, assessment, and order as the primary responsibilities needed by a school leader to implement the RTI initiative.</p>



STUDY	PURPOSE	PARTICIPANTS	DESIGN	OUTCOMES
Littman, 2010	To examine and describe the processes followed and experiences had by the administrators, teachers, and specialists involved in designing and implementing a new RTI model at an elementary school in the Northern Rocky Mountain Region. To examine the effectiveness of the RTI model on raising achievement scores in reading after its first year of implementation.	Random Sample of school level and county level employees in a Colorado School District	Mixed-Methods	Administrators felt pressured to put RTI into effect quickly due to the needs of students in the district and new educational policies mandating immediate changes to long-standing practices. Logistical obstacles to implementation arose, including scheduling and credits earned towards graduation of secondary students. While the new RTI model presented difficult challenges, district level administrators felt successful having met the district goals for the year and perceived growth on standardized tests. Quantitative analyses examined the growth rates of students receiving <i>intervention</i> versus students in comparison groups. Results revealed the presence of a statistically significant treatment effect in favor of students in the <i>intervention</i> groups on the spring 2009 Colorado Student Assessment Program.

STUDY	PURPOSE	PARTICIPANTS	DESIGN	OUTCOMES
Mitchell, 2010	<p>To examine teacher perceptions about how they are prepared to understand and implement RTI before it officially begins in a school.</p> <p>To examine what types of training or professional development are provided prior to beginning the process and for how long.</p>	The targeted population was a Pilot Study of 10 general education teachers.	Qualitative Study	<p>Participants indicated that the majority of teachers felt positive about the training they had received; however, they felt they had not received enough training.</p> <p>Other themes emerged regarding leadership, special education involvement, general education responsibilities, and beliefs in RTI.</p>

STUDY	PURPOSE	PARTICIPANTS	DESIGN	OUTCOMES
Newman, 2008	To investigate educators' perspectives regarding the implementation of Response-to-Intervention (RTI), a complex school reform being introduced to monitor the achievement of all students, in particular, students at-risk for learning difficulties.	Sample of Twenty-eight educators participated in the study.	Qualitative Study	Results indicated that while both schools implemented frameworks closely aligned to guidelines mandated by empirical research and federal policies, the models of RTI that were constructed varied according to the specific goals, resources and expertise of the people and the context of the school. Demonstrated the complexity of school-wide reforms and the many inter-related influences that affect implementation. While large-scale implementation of RTI is happening at schools across.

STUDY	PURPOSE	PARTICIPANTS	DESIGN	OUTCOMES
Nicholson, 2009	To describe the experiences of two Rhode Island elementary schools at different stages of RTI implementation.	Two elementary schools were selected for the study.	Multiple-case study and cross-case analysis	The principal has numerous responsibilities in the implementation of RTI. Leadership factors that were found to correlate with sustained implementation included providing initial and on-going professional development, providing teacher support, maintaining positive relationships with teachers, and demonstrating a strong sense of purpose. District leaders can contribute to sustainable RTI initiatives by creating a district plan for professional development for administrators and district blueprints for implementation. Schools that function as professional learning communities are poised for sustainable implementation of RTI. Parents play a nebulous role in RTI. Parents receive minimal information about RTI and seldom participate in problem-solving or decision-making processes or in the development of RTI initiatives.

STUDY	PURPOSE	PARTICIPANTS	DESIGN	OUTCOMES
Rosengarten, 2011	To investigate the relationship between the use of RTI data in consultation, teacher efficacy, teachers' causal attributions for success and failure, and <i>teachers'</i> perceptions of the value of the consultation process.	One hundred and eighty three elementary school <i>teachers</i> were recruited from public and private schools via email.	Mixed- Methods	Two separate one-way MANOVA were computed to investigate teachers' attributions (i.e., effort, intellectual ability, liking for reading, the teacher, help at home, difficulty of reading material, luck, and developmentally ready/learning disability) for success and failure in consultation conditions with and without RTI data. MANOVA results revealed that there were no main effects.

## APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVAL

Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs <b>Institutional Review Board (IRB)</b>		
Phone: 912-478-0843		Veazey Hall 2021
Fax: 912-478-0719	IRB@GeorgiaSouthern.edu	P.O. Box 8005 Statesboro, GA 30460

**To:** Naesha Parks  
Linda Arthur  
Department of Leadership, Technology, and Human Development

**CC:** Charles E. Patterson  
Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate College

**From:** Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs  
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees  
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

**Initial Approval Date:** April 14, 2011

**Expiration Date:** August 31, 2011

**Subject:** Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

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After a review of your proposed research project numbered **H11407** and titled "**The Impact of Response to Intervention on Special Education Identification**," it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable. You are authorized to enroll up to **36** subjects.

*Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.*

If at the end of this approval period there have been no changes to the research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period. Total project approval on this application may not exceed 36 months. If additional time is required, a new application may be submitted for continuing work. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,



Eleanor Haynes  
Compliance Officer

## APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT



COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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DEPARTMENT OF LEADERSHIP, TECHNOLOGY, AND HUMAN  
DEVELOPMENT

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### INFORMED CONSENT

1. I am a doctoral student working under the direction of Dr. Linda Arthur in the Department of Leadership, Technology, and Human Development at Georgia Southern University. I am conducting a research study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education.
  
2. Purpose of the Study: The purpose of this research is to determine the impact of Response to Intervention on special education identification.
  
3. Procedures to be followed: Participation in this research will include focused interviews with administrators and teachers. Interview questions will be targeted to address the research questions proposed in the study.
  
4. Discomforts and Risks: There are no risks associated with participation in this study.
  
5. Benefits:
  - a. The benefits to the participant include learning more about the Response to Intervention process and obtaining a better understanding of effective and ineffective practices related to RTI. Finally, learning the impact of RTI on special education

identification and the ability to use this information to impact RTI and early intervention services in their buildings before referring students to special education.

6. Duration/Time: This interview will take about 60 minutes to complete.
7. Statement of Confidentiality: The researcher will protect your name and school affiliation.
8. Right to Ask Questions: Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact Naesha Parks or the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Linda Arthur whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant or the IRB approval process, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-681-0843.
9. Data Storage: Audio tapes of the interviews with principals and teachers will be destroyed after the transcripts are prepared, and all other data files will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office.
10. Compensation: There are no costs or compensations associated with participation in the research.
11. Voluntary Participation: You do not have to participate in this research; you may end your participation at any time by notifying Naesha Parks through your building administrator.
12. Penalty: There is no penalty for deciding not to participate in the study; if you decide at any time you do not want to participate further you may withdraw without penalty or retribution.
13. Consent: Your consent to participate in the study will be considered given by your participation in the interview.
14. Age: You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study.
15. If you have any questions or would like a copy of the completed research study; please contact me using the contact information listed below.



16. To contact the Office of Research Compliance for answers to questions about the rights of research participants or for privacy concerns please email [IRB@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:IRB@georgiasouthern.edu) or call (912) 478-0843. This project has been reviewed and approved by the GSU IRB under tracking number H11407.

Please keep this consent form for your records.

Title of Project: THE IMPACT OF RTI ON SPECIAL EDUCATION IDENTIFICATION

Investigator: Naesha Parks, 585 Oakbrook Drive, Martinez, GA 30907, (706)306-4845,  
[Naesha.parks@ccboe.net](mailto:Naesha.parks@ccboe.net)

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Linda Arthur, Georgia Southern University, Department of Leadership,  
Technology, and Human Development, P.O. Box 8131, Statesboro, GA 30460,  
(912).478.0697, [larthur@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:larthur@georgiasouthern.edu)