Implementation of a Response to Intervention in Rural Early and Middle Years Schools

BY

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommended to the Senate for acceptance, a **MASTER'S THESIS** entitled:

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative study explored the experiences of administrators while implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) in early/middle years schools in rural Manitoba. Administrators were interviewed to discover how they experienced the implementation process and to glean advice for other administrators who were beginning the process of implementing RTI. Data were collected through recorded phone interviews with each participant by the researcher.

The study's findings demonstrated that the decision to implement RTI resulted from a need to support students who presented gaps in their skills. The decision was made by administrators and superintendents in order to close the skill gaps. The administrators shared the experiences that they encountered during the implementation process as well as expected and unexpected results of implementing RTI in the school. The administrators provided advice that would support an administrator new to the process of implementing RTI in a rural early or middle years school. The study also revealed some resources, professional development, and strategies to effectively implement RTI.

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Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude and love to my husband who stood behind, encouraged, and pushed me to complete the masters program. The accomplishment is as much his as it is mine. Thank you.

Author

Alann Fraser

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, Ruby Reddaway. Though she was not a formal teacher of mine, she encouraged me to be the best teacher possible. Her years of teaching were an inspiration to me as a child and have pushed me to provide the best education possible for all students I come in contact with.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction and Purpose

Response to Intervention (RTI) is an approach that provides appropriate supports for all students in a school, including those students who struggle with learning or have disabilities of any kind. The RTI concept began to take shape in the late 1970's as a reaction to the practice of determining eligibility for special education services by showing the discrepancy between I.Q. and achievement scores for a student. The model gained additional traction with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 which allowed school districts to use the RTI model as a way of identifying students needing special services ("Education for All", n. d.). Decisions are made through data collection, collaboration between educators and families, quality instruction and assessments. RTI uses a three-Tier approach that provides increasingly intensive interventions dependent on student needs. Tier 1 provides general education with quality instruction and assessment, Tier 2 moves to more intensive teaching in small groups, Tier 3 is individualized and highly intensive teaching to close skill gaps that students possess.

RTI is a hierarchy of interventions. Tier 1 reflects effective core instruction for all students. This is quality instruction, assessment, and movement through student learning, directed by the classroom teacher. Tier 2 interventions are supplementary interventions for identified students. These interventions may serve small groups of students. Interventions may be provided by the regular classroom teacher or by a team of staff members, including learning support teachers, administrators, and outside professionals. Tier 3 interventions are intensive interventions for individual students. The team provides these, and students often work with specialists in specific areas, i.e., Reading Recovery teachers and learning support teachers. Boundaries between the tiers are flexible, depending on the needs of the students. Movement

between the tiers is based on how well the interventions have supported the students' needs. Decisions regarding movement between tiers must be made collaboratively amongst the members of the team and based on data that had been gathered on the students' performance with the interventions ("What is RTI?", n.d., "The Essential Components of RTI", n.d).

Each level within RTI supports students in a different way (see Figure 1). Tier 1 consists of regular classroom, quality core instruction that uses a gradual release of responsibility. This is whole-class and small-group instruction and assessment. Approximately 75-85% of students will fit into Tier 1. Tier 2 supplements the core instruction with needs-based intervention. This tends to be in the form of small-group interventions. Assessments are more regular than in Tier 1. Approximately 10-15% of students will be well served through Tier 2 intervention. Tier 3 is intensive individualized instruction. This is one-on-one instruction and assessment from a learning support teacher. Approximately 5-10% of students will require Tier 3 interventions (Fisher & Frey, 2010, p. 23). While all three tiers exist simultaneously, a student will only be placed in one tier at any one time. Mobility from tier to tier is possible, however, and even desirable. For example, if a student in tier 2 responds to the interventions at that level to the point of not needing to remain in tier 2 anymore, then that student will be reassigned into tier 1. Conversely, if a student is not responding adequately to interventions at the tier 2 level, for example, a tier 3 placement will be made for that student.

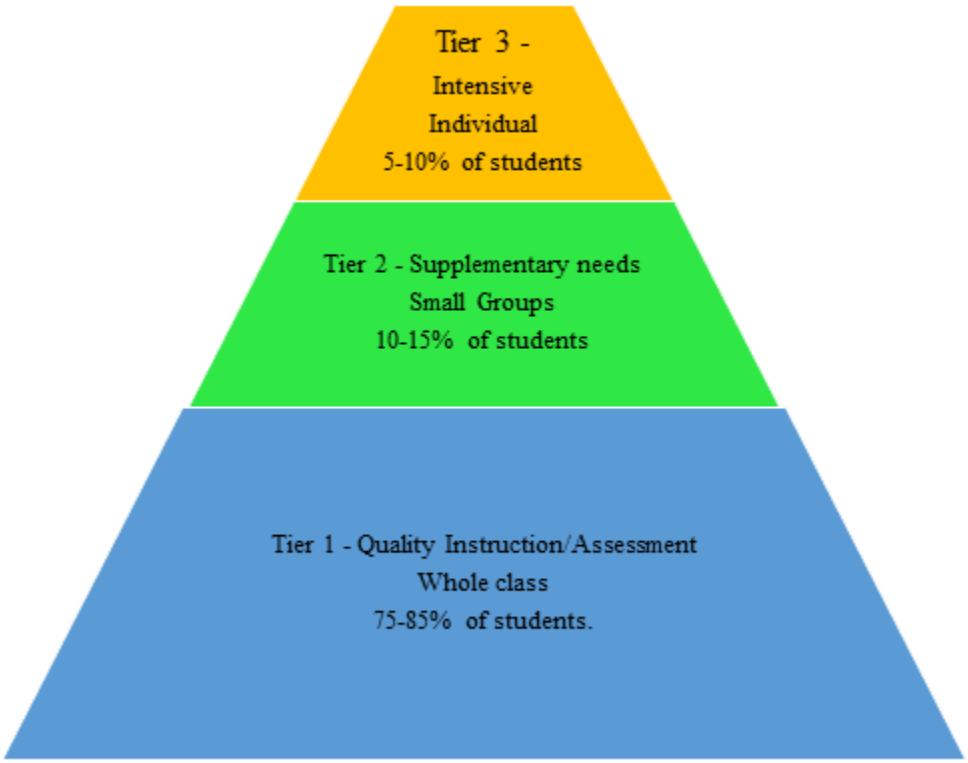

Figure 1. The RTI Pyramid of Interventions

Quality Tier 1 instruction is based on a variety of teaching pedagogy. Differentiated Instruction (Manitoba Education & Training, 1996), Balanced Literacy (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), Backwards Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006), Universal Design for Learning (Katz, 2013), Culturally Responsive Instruction (Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway 2011), Precision Teaching (West & Young, 1992), and Assessment Intervention Monitoring System (McConnell, 2000) are all widely regarded as examples of quality classroom instruction and assessment practices of benefit to all students and therefore would fall into the category of Tier 1 interventions (Hutchinson, 2013). These types of pedagogy focus on all students in a classroom setting. If the intervention is working, progress monitoring will show successful growth in the student. When the student is not responding to the intervention, the approach needs to change, and progress monitoring must continue until the student improves. Tier 1 interventions do not

diagnosis a student, but they focus on whether the student has a skill gap and they help the student to close the gap (Rush, Dobbins, & Kurtts, 2010 pp. 2-3).

Tier 2 supports are targeted, research-based interventions for students who did not respond to Tier 1 instruction. A problem-solving model is implemented in Tier 2. This model includes the following four steps: (a) define the problem, (b) plan an intervention, (c) implement the plan, and (d) evaluate the students' progress. Tier 2 programming includes providing service in small-groups within the regular classroom with flexible, small-group instruction and focused supports that are research based (Rush et al. 2010, p. 3).

Tier 3 supports are intensive instruction and assessments. Students who require individualized instruction beyond Tier 2 to access the general curriculum require Tier 3 supports. These interventions are longer, more frequent sessions outside of the regular classroom. These are individualized interventions such as one-on-one tutoring and individualized instruction. Frequent monitoring and documentation, based on problem-solving and data collection, are used to adjust school-wide and specific interventions (Rush et al. 2010 p. 5). If any students do not respond to interventions in Tier 3, then comprehensive evaluations must be used to individualize education plans for those students through special education.

Students must be assessed and interventions put into place that address the difficulties that the student are facing. After six to eight weeks, students need to be assessed again to see how they have responded to the intervention. If individual students have not made sufficient gains after this intervention, decisions need to be made in regards to moving to more intensive interventions for those students. There is a continual cycle of pre-assessment, intervention, and assessment of growth to ensure that the students are making accelerated gains in their learning. When acceleration is not happening, better decisions are needed to support the student.

Collaboration is key to implementing RTI as a school-wide way to support students. Everyone must be on board and active in the process (Dulaney, 2013). Administrators, regular classroom teachers, learning support teachers, speech and language pathologists, guidance counsellors, and any other specialists involved in the school must be part of the team as the student moves between Tiers. The family also has a role to play as a team member. Staff must feel supported and receive supports to decide on the next steps that individual students need in order to move forward in their learning. Professional development is a necessary factor in implementing a strong RTI model in a school system.

Background to the Problem

Manitoba Education and Training has a three-level approach to funding for students. Level I students are students who need extra support in the classroom, such as access to a resource teacher and counsellor ("Manitoba to Review Funding Process," 2015). For students who face more significant learning challenges, categorical grants are given to school divisions to provide student specific funding for students who match set criteria for Levels 2 and 3 (Manitoba Education and Training, 2016). As an educator in rural and northern Manitoba over the past 22 years, I have seen many students who do not qualify for levelled funding, and therefore fall further and further behind in their education. These level I students often have deficits in skills that for some reason were missed in their early school experiences. As they grow older, the skill gaps become wider; the students become frustrated, lack motivation for school, struggle to read and write, and often decide to drop out of school. Many times, I have had conversations with teachers and administrators regarding what could be done to support these students. Usually the answer is the same, "We need to do something but what?" I walk away still wondering how to answer the "what" portion of the question. The answer requires more than some money from the

Department of Education to hire an educational assistant. What can schools do, as a system-wide approach, that will support students throughout their school years? RTI maybe a step towards providing that system-wide approach to student support.

Statement of the Problem

It has been my observation as a member of the Manitoba education community that students in rural and northern Manitoba do not always have the same access to supports as urban students do. Classes are smaller, which is an asset, but there is rarely access to other services. Rural schools have fewer staff members and collaboration teams are smaller. Often the teams consist of the classroom teacher, learning support teacher, and administrator. There may be outside supports, such as a speech and language pathologist, occupational therapist, physical therapist and psychologist, however; these individuals are often shared among many schools, and therefore can not offer as much assistance as the school may want, since the school division's central administration may have assigned percentage times for service delivery to each of its schools based upon student population and other factors. Things are even tighter when the learning support teacher, or special education teacher is also the administrator, as in my case. Urban schools have access to more resources and personnel to support students on a regular basis. Ideas and resources can become limited when there are fewer members on the team.

Students who struggle are often passed over to educational assistants, members of the community who do not have formal training in education. These assistants may try hard but often do not have the required strategies to support the students. These students are in more need of skilled teachers to support them in dealing with their skill gaps. They need carefully planned interventions, skilled classroom and special education teachers, and tight timelines to achieve accelerated learning. These students require intensive supports that do not interfere with their

core instruction times. Students who struggle require this core instruction time as well as supports above and beyond that to fill their skill gap (core and more!). Being removed from the regular English Language Arts class to receive intervention from the learning support teacher only places the student further behind. Creative timetabling is also required to support these students. Students who struggle with reading and writing must receive quality instruction in addition to extra support.

Teachers also require support through the process of RTI. Support needs to take many forms. Professional development is essential. Teachers require the skills to ensure all students receive quality instruction and assessment. On-going professional development supports the teacher in developing and delivering clear comprehensive lessons that follow a well-planned path to student learning of all curricular outcomes. Teachers need to break down outcomes into manageable steps for students to have a deep understanding of the outcomes. They are then able to recognize areas in which students struggle and intervene quickly to support these students. Along with professional development, teachers need time to collaborate with other professionals, plan for intervention, and assess students before making decisions around those students' needs. Time must also be available to work with individual students as well as small groups.

Teachers and administrators of rural schools are looking for more ways to support their students who may fall through the cracks of our education system because they have been without the supports they need. Rural schools do not have the same opportunities or resources as many urban schools. Access to technology and internet, PD, specialists, and materials are difficult to access in rural schools. Teachers and administrators struggle in finding supports for students who need extra supports when the usual supports do not work. Students, who are considered Level I students and require more than just the core teaching, need short-term

supports to bring them to the desired level. However the government funding for level I students is a block grant and must be shared among all students. Therefore extra funding targeted to a particular student is not available. Rural schools with limited staff, resources, time constraints, and finances have to find something to support these students. This leads to the need to implement RTI in order to support these students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of those administrators who have attempted to implement RTI, and to seek to discover best practices for its successful implementation on a school-wide basis. Administrators who have successfully implemented RTI in their school systems have invaluable information to share with administrators who are on the path to implementing RTI in their own schools. This study focused on how to implement RTI in rural early/middle years schools in the most effective way to support all students.

Research Questions

The primary research question for this study therefore was: How can administrators of rural or northern early/middle years schools implement RTI programming in their schools in the most effective way to support all students? In pursuit of this research question, secondary questions asked: How was the decision to implement RTI made? What were the schools' experiences in implementing RTI? What expected and unexpected results of implementing RTI were found? What advice would administrators give to someone beginning the process of implementing RTI in a rural early/middle years school? What other topics or issues that are relevant to implementing RTI and should be discussed for consideration in implementing RTI at the early/middle years levels in rural or northern schools?

Significance of the Study

Learning from the experience of others will support principals of rural schools in implementing RTI in their small schools to benefit all students. Being knowledgeable of others' advice is supportive to someone new to a school-wide system of RTI. Information gleaned from research into these topics will support an easier transition in implementing RTI in rural schools, which will then produce effective change for all students. The successful implementation of RTI in the schools will answer the question of "We need to do something but what?" for many educators and administrators.

Limitations and Delimitations of the Study

This thesis study focused on early/middle years schools in rural Manitoba. A small number of administrators (n=6) participated in the research, so the findings represent a small percentage of rural Manitoba early/middle years schools who have implemented RTI. Choices were made as to what not to include in the study (delimitations) and these included large schools, urban schools, and schools in other provinces, territories or countries. This decision was made in part based on its relevance to the researcher who also works in a small rural Manitoba school. Further, the inclusion of interviews as a source of data was a factor. With interviews to arrange, record, transcribe, and analyse, it was felt that an $n<10$ would make the research manageable.

Given these circumstances, the limitations of the study will include it's potential applicability only to small, rural schools, possibly only in the Province of Manitoba. It is the researcher's belief that had the research participants been a larger number, and included schools outside of the Province of Manitoba, the findings would be much the same: however, this remains unproven at this time.

Definition of Terms

Many educational terms have been used in this research. To ensure that the understanding of the reader and writer are the same, the following definitions are used throughout this research report.

3-Tier approach – an approach that uses three levels of increasingly intensive interventions that are dependent on student needs (Fisher & Frey, 2010, p. 23; Manitoba Education and Training, 2014).

Accommodate – to make fit (Brown-Chidsey, Bronaugh, & McGraw, 2009, p. 18).

Accommodation – ways of helping students who are struggling with an assignment (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 18).

Administrators – formal leaders of the school.

Adaptation –"means a change made in the teaching process, resources, assignments, or pupil products to help a pupil achieve the expected learning outcomes. Adaptation addresses identified student-specific needs. For example, a student with a print disability may require information and directions to be presented verbally as well as in writing, and may need to demonstrate his or her learning in the same ways. A student with an attention disorder may require that instructions and assignments be broken into "chunks," and may require a checklist to monitor task completion." (Manitoba Education, 2010).

Alphabetic principle – the ability to associate sounds with letters and use these sounds to form words, essential to the process of learning to read because it involves the connection between print and speech (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 82).

Alphabetic understanding – the knowledge that letters represent sounds in words (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 82).

Assessment – the systematic collection and analysis of information to make a decision (McConnell, 2000, p. 44).

Assessment Intervention Monitoring System (AIMS) – the use of assessments to decide whether the intervention in use is successful or needs to change in order to support the student more effectively (Rush, Dobbins & Kurtts, 2010).

Backwards design – this is the model outlined by Wiggins and McTighe (2000) in their book *Understanding by Design*. While backwards design and understanding by design are used interchangeably, the term backwards design is in more common use among educators. In this model, learning experiences are planned with the end in mind. A teacher begins planning with the goals or standards and then decides on the curriculum and evidence of learning of the standard and the teaching needed.

Balanced literacy – a method of teaching reading in which phonics and whole language approaches are both used to maximize student learning. Aspects of reading and writing are taught equally (Au, et. al., 1997).

Collaboration – the act of working with someone to produce or create something. Collaboration between educators provides effective instruction and assessment for all students.

Communication – exchanging information through many forms, including oral and written.

Comprehension – the ultimate goal of reading, obtaining information, and understanding it (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 86).

Core curriculum – the program intended to meet the needs of most students which guides instruction in each grade level (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 33).

Core instruction – high quality initial instruction (Fisher & Frey, 2010, p. 30).

Culturally responsive instruction – a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes (Rajagopal, 2011, p. 1).

Data-based decision making – the aggregation of screening and process monitoring data that is used to compare and contrast the effectiveness of different instruction ("Essential Components," n.d., p. 5).

Diagnostic assessments – help us know what exactly a students need to work on to increase their performance in the target areas. Assessments are detailed, specific, and facilitate flexible administration. (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 45).

Diagnostic teaching – a method of using data from teaching sessions to identify a student's learning needs. (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 21).

Differentiated instruction – teaching that is different from what was used before or for other students, a way of creating differences in curricular experiences and providing multiple options for learning (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, pp. 18-42; Manitoba Education 2010, p. 17).

Educational assistant – a person hired to support the work of professional staff, such as teachers and clinicians (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2009, p. 3).

Educator – a person who provides instruction: teacher, administrator, etc.

Explicit instruction – direct, straightforward, and clear teaching (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 41).

Fluency – the effortless, automatic ability to read words in text, such that decoding is automatic and requires no conscious attention (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 83).

Guidance counsellor – Provides a continuum of preventive, developmental, and intervention services within educational settings and facilitate referrals to community resources. The counsellor is a member of the student services team (Manitoba Education, Citizenship & Youth, 2007, p. 4) .

Individualized programming – intended for students whose cognitive disabilities are so significant that they do not benefit from regular curricula developed by Manitoba Education and Training (Manitoba Education and Training, 2017, p. 96).

Intervention – teaching that is used with just a few students at a time, anything that is designed to change the setting or individual in specific ways (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, pp. 17-18).

Instruction – to direct or teach all students in a class (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 17).

Intensity – degree of strength (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 19).

Learning difficulties – a number of conditions that might affect the acquisition, retention, understanding, or use of verbal or nonverbal information that result in impairments related to perceiving, thinking, remembering, or learning (BC Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 6).

Learning support teacher – an educational teacher who specializes in working with students with identified needs.

Needs-based intervention – development and implementation of procedures and practices to support all learners (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 4).

Occupational therapist – a professional trained to help people improve their ability to do activities related to their daily living. Examples include self-care, work and leisure, student-specific assessments, and modifications and supports for individual students and staff members. (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014, p. 97).

Outside professional – a professional who supports students but is not part of the regular school team. Examples include Child and Family Services, physician, mental health worker, etc.

Pedagogy – creation of effective lesson plans for classroom instruction (Sonwalker, 2011).

Phonemes – small units of speech that correspond to letters of an alphabetic writing system (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 81).

Phonological awareness – the ability to detect and manipulate the sound structure of words independent of their meaning (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 81).

Physiotherapist – a professional concerned with the assessment, maintenance, and improvement with physical function. Examples include student-specific assessments, and modifications and supports to meet individual students' physical needs. (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014, p. 97).

Policy – a definite course or method of action selected from among alternatives and in light of given conditions to guide present and future decisions ("Policy," 2017).

Problem-solving model – an effective set of skills used in a step-by-step process ("Problem-Solving Model", 2017).

Professional development – development of a person in his or her professional role (Quattlebaum, 2012).

Progress monitoring – brief and economical measures that are used over time to document growth (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 46).

Precision teaching –a precise and systematic method of evaluating instructional tactics and curricula (West & Young, 1992).

Professional Learning Community – a staff that has a shared knowledge and solid foundation, they can move on to successful collaboration (DuFour, 2004).

Psychologist – a professional who studies how we think, feel, and behave from a scientific viewpoint and applies this knowledge to help people understand, explain, and change their behaviour (*Canadian Psychological Association*, 2017).

Quality instruction – the use of both research-validated instruction and practices and core programs ("High-Quality Instruction," 2017).

Response to Intervention – integrates assessment and intervention within a multi-level system to maximize student achievement and to reduce behavior problems. With RTI, schools identify students at risk for poor learning outcomes, monitor student progress, provide evidence-based interventions, and adjust the intensity and nature of those interventions, depending on a student's responsiveness; and identify students with learning disabilities. (National Center on Response to Intervention, 2012, p. 36).

Screening assessment – brief, economical test that provides a snapshot of how a student is doing in a targeted area (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 34).

Skill gaps – the lack of fundamental reading, writing, mathematical, and communication skills that employers require for a work environment to be effective ("Skill Gap," 2017).

Speech and language pathologist – a professional who provides knowledge and skills in the area of communication development and difficulties (Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, 2014, p. 98).

Supplementary – extra supports above and beyond regular instruction .

Targeted research-based interventions – treatments that have been proved effective through outcome evaluations (University of Missouri, 2011).

Universal Design for Learning – a framework for designing flexible lessons and learning environments to work for the widest variety of students (BC Ministry of Education, 2017).

Universal Screening - "In the context of an RTI prevention model, universal screening is the first step in identifying the students who are at risk for learning difficulties. It is the mechanism for targeting students who struggle to learn when provided a scientific, evidence-based general education (Jenkins, Hudson, & Johnson, 2007). Universal screening is typically conducted three times per school year, in the fall, winter, and spring. Universal screening measures consist of brief assessments focused on target skills (e.g., phonological awareness) that are highly predictive of future outcomes (Jenkins, 2003)." (Hughes & Dexter, n.d.).

Vocabulary – the ability to understand and use words to acquire and convey meaning. (Brown-Chidsey et al., 2009, p. 85).

Overview of the Thesis

Chapter one introduces the research. Chapter two provides the literature review, which further describes the concept of Response to Intervention. Chapter three outlines the methodology of the study. Chapter four descripts the results of the study. Chapter five offers conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

Response to Intervention (RTI) was developed as a way to ensure that all students receive levels of support that are suited to their learning needs. Prescribed interventions are based on regularly gathered assessment data, in order that students needing support receive it in a timely way before they fall too far behind their classmates (Fisher & Frey, 2010 pp. 15-16). A key premise of RTI is that effective early intervention will prevent greater difficulties as students become older. Instructional methods within RTI are guided by models of differentiated instruction (Manitoba Education and Training, 1996) and Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006).

The Response to Intervention (RTI) Model

RTI is based upon four foundations: data collection, analysis and reflection, instructional planning, and intervention. An effective implementation of RTI is dependent upon a systematic collection of student performance data. The data must include information on instructional context and the strengths and needs of the individual students. This is gathered through teacher observations, checklists, work samples, interviews, and professional judgement to evaluate the learners and the factors that affect their academic and social growth. The data must be analyzed critically to develop effective instructional planning on a regular basis. Teachers must take the knowledge from the data analysis to plan instruction and interventions based both on curricular outcomes and students' performances. Teachers will group their students for effective instruction in whole groups, small groups, and individually depending on the needs at the time. Teachers need to ensure quality teaching practices via modeling, prompting, guiding, error correction, practice, and feedback. Interactions with students during instruction and assessing of

work samples lead teachers to develop interventions and next steps for all students in their classrooms. This is a repetitive cycle that continues throughout the whole school year. As the cycle continues, teachers need to notice which students the instruction has not supported and deliver more intensive interventions of support. This cycle enables all students to reach high levels of achievement (Fisher & Frey 2010 pp. 19-21).

RTI is used by school administrators to effect school improvement. Regular classroom teachers are expected to work with learning support teachers and other school specialists to meet the needs of diverse learners. All educators work collaboratively with quality instruction and data-based decisions to provide programming for all students. RTI focuses on six common principles: (1) multi-Tiers of intervention to ensure top support for every student, (2) high quality instruction with high quality of implementation, (3) research based curricula, (4) data collection of both formative and summative assessments, (5) interventions that are research based, and (6) measures that monitor the fidelity of implementation (Jackson, Pretti-Frontczak, Harjusola-Webb, Grisham-Brown, & Romani, 2009, p. 6).

RTI programs rely on two types of formative evaluations while making decisions. Universal screening is completed in the beginning, middle, and end of the school year. Data collection at the school level measures the effectiveness of school-wide instruction and determines whether modifications are needed to be proactive in supporting students. Progress monitoring also provides information about interventions and changes instruction based on student responses to the interventions. Progress monitoring needs to be brief and timely, monthly or even weekly (McIntosh et al., 2011, p. 26).

RTI in Canada

Provinces in Canada are recognizing prevention as an important goal. Some provinces are taking additional steps to implement RTI in policy. Some of these policies include provisions for those students who demonstrate the need for special education resources above and beyond what can be provided in the RTI model. Provinces such as Nova Scotia, British Columbia and Quebec use a "failed RTI" model in their policies on learning disabilities (McIntosh et al., 2011, p. 31). That is, students who fail to respond to significant school-based interventions over a reasonable amount of time, or who are at risk of having a learning disability, may be referred to a qualified psychologist for a psychoeducational assessment (British Columbia Association of School Psychologists, 2007, p. 10). Saskatchewan promotes support based upon individual needs, using a three-tiered model of service delivery. In Manitoba, students who show inadequate response to interventions are referred for more in-depth assessments. Prince Edward Island and the Northwest Territories use a non-categorical approach that is consistent with RTI for special education eligibility (McIntosh et al., 2011 p. 31).

RTI in Rural Settings

RTI is intended to be implemented across all types of educational settings; however, certain types of settings present increased challenges to effective RTI implementation. Rural schools face a variety of challenges and supports when implementing RTI in their unique settings (Bailey, 2014, pp. 34-39). Challenges and supports fall under the following domains: cost, time, professional development, resources, administrative support, student and family involvement, teachers and staff, and rural community. Rural schools face challenges with time for interventions and teaming, cost of interventions, costs and availability of professional development, limited staff buy-in, lack of data analysis skills in intervention development,

implementing too much too quickly, and interference from competing programs and activities. Teacher motivation and commitment are affected by all of this. Many schools struggle with the startup costs and minimum purchases. Collaborative grade level teaming, which is essential to decision making, is often impossible due to the reality of only one teacher per grade or multiple grades. Professional development is affected by the lack of substitutes and the cost and time of travel to larger centers for training. Staff turnover affects the programing, and momentum is lost as key members leave the school and newcomers arrive who have not been part of the previous professional development (Bailey, 2014).

While there are challenges, supports for RTI can also be found in rural schools. Small staff and school size can make collaboration easier from K-12. Small class sizes and small school populations enable teachers to identify and meet the needs of struggling students without being as dependent on the RTI data as they might be in a larger school. All staff members know all students well, and formal meetings are not needed as much because teachers often meet informally with other teachers and parents around student needs. More teacher input on decision making is typical in small rural schools (Bailey, 2014).

In their study of two rural elementary schools in the southeastern United States, Robinson, Bursuck, and Sinclair (2013) found a variety of factors that influence the effectiveness of implementing RTI in rural school settings. Their recommendations identify the need for effective ongoing professional development, fiscal and administrative support, recruitment and retention of highly qualified staff, and scientifically-based instruction with continuous monitoring of student progress to inform instructional decision making. Schools and divisions need to work collaboratively and not independently, in order for RTI to be successful in rural areas. School leaders, whether formal or informal leaders, need to continue to support each other

through effective, timely, and relevant professional development. It is imperative that Robinson et. al's recommendations be implemented for RTI to be effective.

The implementation of RTI requires many structural and staffing changes to support new ways of doing things for teachers (Printy & Williams, 2015). Changes must include adjustments to the master schedule of the school and reassigning staff. RTI must include a class period devoted to working with all students and staff. RTI involves sound educational practice for all students, for both regular and special needs students. The programs studied by Printy and Williams (2015) focused on multi-tiered systems of support that were enhanced by data-based decision making and collaborative teacher learning. However, it was also noted that during the implementation phase, principals tended to add interventions instead of addressing issues that dealt with Tier 1 instruction. The researchers cautioned that no number of interventions can make up for inadequate Tier 1 instruction.

Printy and Williams (2015) worked with six principals to discover how middle school principals interpreted the policy messages about RTI that they received, and how they undertook the implementation of RTI in literacy and numeracy in their schools. They confirmed that strong leadership at the site level and the involvement of teachers make a difference in how reform is implemented. Other factors were also identified as supportive of successful implementation. It was critical that schools received a consistent message from the superintendent that RTI was the direction of school improvement efforts within the county. Schools needed to understand that the RTI data use and intervention strategies were intended to raise student skills. Scheduled training sessions brought principals, teachers, and coaches together to master aspects of implementing RTI, which included screening and using data to organize interventions. Principals presented staffing and scheduling options. The more successful schools reported close

collaboration between the superintendent and principals, who regularly reviewed data and monitored the progress of implementation. They noted that there was a sense of reciprocal accountability, and that superintendents held principals accountable for results and provided adequate resources to sustain or increase results (Printy & Williams, 2015).

Teachers' Perspectives on RTI

Teachers too offer a unique perspective on the RTI implementation process (Duncan, 2017; Horne, 2018; Stuart et al., 2011). A goal of RTI is that all educators will collaborate to ensure that all student needs are met through early intervention and prevention. Fundamental and systemic changes must happen, and must include students, classrooms, school buildings and the division office. Good communication and effective collaboration is essential for effective RTI implementation (Tucker, 2016). Teachers have historically worked in isolation, but RTI requires that they learn how to work collaboratively to improve student learning (Dulaney, 2013). Special education and general classroom teachers have different skills and knowledge regarding RTI, evidence-based practices, and data-based decision making (Hurlbut & Tunks, 2016). All teachers need to learn to collaborate around instructional planning, teaching and evaluation of student outcomes.

Meyer and Behar-Horenstein (2015) researched teacher perspectives on implementing RTI. Teachers in this study felt that they were familiar with using data-based decision making to enhance the Tier 1 curriculum through scaffolding and differentiated instruction. They felt that the team-based collaboration became more successful after implementing RTI. Teachers shared a variety of frustrations: challenges to their organization, teacher planning time and energy levels, lack of available time during working hours, uncertainty about how to comply with research-based interventions, and recalibrating their changing professional roles. They were

expected to be “RTI experts” even though they felt that they had received inadequate professional development and administrative support. They did not feel that the leadership shared the same sense of pressure and accountability as teachers.

Teachers were looking for increased administrative presence in their classrooms, explicit procedural direction from administrators, and more instructional staff to provide research-based interventions and assistance. Teachers were also looking for more professional development on gathering and analyzing data collaboratively, using data for progress monitoring, and working effectively with the data management system. They were looking for more tangible and functional educational resources such as flowcharts, decision-making guides, and lists of research-based interventions (Myer & Behar Horenstein, 2015).

Teachers found ways to cope despite the challenges. Four strategies became useful to the teachers as they were learning about RTI: collaborating as a team, questioning the team, observing other teachers, and initiating professional development. Even though teachers were frustrated and lacked professional development, assistance from the administrator, and the necessary RTI resources, they believe that RTI motivated them to become better teachers. Teachers shared new information, created hands-on experiences to assist language development, posted lesson plans to share, and developed common instructional activities, assignments, and assessments. This led them to be more consistent in planning and teaching across the grade levels. They enjoyed learning from each other and understood that collaboration was a necessary component of RTI and could be used to improve student learning, make better instructional decisions, and improve their own learning.

One research question asked, “What new practices are required for teachers during RTI implementation?” The responses to this question led to a variety of recommendations.

Professional development and training was the main theme, and teachers reported needs for additional training in the following areas:

- differentiating and scaffolding core instruction to accelerate student learning,
- analyzing data to determine how to share students across the grade level,
- analyzing data to group students for Tier 2 interventions and identify them for Tier 3 interventions,
- identifying research-based interventions targeted to specific student needs,
- regrouping students receiving interventions outside the classroom to make room for migrant students arriving later in the school year,
- developing effective progress-monitoring plans,
- using a data management platform to record progress-monitoring data, generate graphs, and compare data across the same and different interventions,
- using time management strategies for team meetings, and
- disturbing team roles to identify action plans and document team decisions.

This strongly supports the notion that that professional development is crucial for the successful implementation of RTI, a principle supported by others (Castillo et. al., 2016; Helman & Rosheim, 2016; Spence, 2017). Implementation will differ from site to site and is unique to the child and classroom levels. Teachers and administrators can create and implement their own RTI models in response to the needs of their own students and schools, but will be better prepared by being aware of this research.

Research Gaps

The research base for establishing the impact of RTI is in an emergent phase. Maskill (2012) discovered in her research that students who were exposed to a high-quality, research-

based reading program and effective interventions made adequate yearly progress. Her research was dependent on all components of reading instruction, and upon RTI being implemented throughout the schools involved in the study. More research is required to determine how the changes to either component affect the overall progress of the students. There is also a need for more research to discover how well students perform after they are no longer eligible for RTI interventions. It is assumed that the students will continue to perform at grade level on their own.

Another area in which additional research is needed by teachers is the lack of policy concerning appropriate measures for students who struggle at Tier 1, but do not respond at Tier 2, and do not qualify for Tier 3. Faced with these students, for whom no level appears to fit, teachers are left to implement interventions on their own without a clear sense of direction from their administrators. Their concerns include what type of interventions to use, how long to implement them before making a formal referral to special education, and what to do with the students who do not respond to interventions. In addition, while there are longitudinal studies of the effects of RTI (Beach & O'Connor, 2015; Simmons et. al., 2008), these studies only reach two years beyond the time of the initial intervention. Therefore, it would appear that there is a need for a longitudinal study of students over a longer period of time, in order to research the true long-term significance of interventions in the early years.

More research is needed for professionals to be confident that RTI is an effective early intervention approach for all students (Hughes & Dexter, 2017). In order for this research to have validity, two things are critical: first, that the sampling includes schools of all levels and sizes, and secondly, that those schools and RTI programs under study have been able to implement the model in an effective way. The goal of this thesis research, therefore, was to

examine the experiences of schools of a small size in rural communities that had attempted to implement the program, and to discover best practices for its effective and successful implementation on a school-wide basis in these contexts. A description of the proposed methodology follows.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

The goal of this study was to examine the experiences of administrators that had attempted to implement Response to Intervention, and to discover best practices for its successful implementation on a school-wide basis. The research focused on the experiences of administrators, in rural early/middle years schools in Manitoba, when implementing RTI for their students. There was a focus on the results, successes of implementation, and challenges that were faced, as well as cautions and unanticipated results. The literature shows RTI to be a successful process of intervention when implemented appropriately in schools. It is important to learn from the experiences of others when implementing RTI.

The Research Design

This study used a qualitative research method. Qualitative research is the collection, analysis, and interpretation of comprehensive and visual data, used to gain insights into a particular phenomenon of interest (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). The data are described both narratively and visually or graphically. Nonnumerical data engender insights into the area of interest, casting a wider net in order to enable unintended findings to emerge along with those that are initially sought. The data collection must contribute to the understanding and resolution of a given problem. Qualitative data may include observations, interviews, questionnaires, phone calls, photographs, personal and corporate documents, drawings, and journal articles. The researcher is the primary data collector.

Interviewing of participants was the method used to gather the data needed for this study. Interviewers probe the responses of the participants to gather in-depth data about their experiences and feelings related to the topic. Researchers can examine attitudes, interests,

feelings, concerns, and values more easily this way than through the use of observations (Toma, 2000). Interviews can be structured in a formal or in an informal way. In a structured interview, the researcher has constructed a set of questions to elicit the same information from all participants. Difficulty can arise, however, when constructing questions that elicit the information that is wanted by the researcher. Therefore, it is more fruitful to conduct the interviews in a semi-structured way that enables the interviewer to react to particular participant responses by asking follow-up questions beyond those in the protocol itself (DeGroot, 2002).

Researcher

The researcher is an administrator/learning support teacher in a rural early/middle years Manitoba school. In her practice, she has often questioned the most effective ways to support students who required interventions but did not qualify for increased special needs funding. These students often had weak skills, and their skill gaps grew each year as they were not receiving interventions to close the gaps. The researcher wanted to ensure that all students received the best education possible to support all of their needs. The researcher interviewed administrators of similar schools in order to understand their experiences in implementing Response to Intervention. Ideally, the findings would inform the researcher on the best courses of action to take when implementing RTI in her own current school.

Setting

All interview participants were administrators of early/middle years rural Manitoban schools. The school populations ranged from 99 to 450 students in grades K-6, K-8 and K-12. All schools had implemented RTI in the early/middle years over approximately the last five to six school years. All participants were interviewed by phone as a recorded formal interview.

Participants

The researcher recruited participants through an initial examination of divisional websites to find schools that had implemented RTI. Then she contacted superintendents via email to give permission to contact their principals. Upon superintendent approval, the principals were contacted via email to solicit their agreement to participate in the interview process (see Appendix C). Both superintendents and principals were asked to sign a formal letter of consent to document their agreement to participate in the research process (see Appendix D). The participants were six principals of schools that had implemented or supported implementation of RTI: one K-6 school, two K-8 schools, and three K-12 schools.

Research Instruments

The researcher interviewed each participant by phone for approximately 30-60 minutes, and recorded the interviews for later data analysis. During this interview, each participant answered a series of six questions (see appendix B). The questions focused on their experiences of implementation of RTI, the differences noticed since RTI was implemented, and any surprises that were encountered during implementation. The questions were as follows:

1. Could you describe your school in terms of its size, its student body, demographics, and challenges or special needs?
2. Could you describe how the decision was made to implement a Response to Intervention program in your school?
3. Could you describe your school's experience in implementing your RTI program?
4. Could you describe the results of your implementation process, including both expected and unexpected results?

5. What advice would you give to someone who is beginning the process of implementing RTI in a rural early/middle years school?
6. Are there any other topics or issues that you feel are relevant and should be discussed?

To ensure credibility or trustworthiness, member checking was a part of the data collection process (Birt et. al, 2016). An opportunity for follow up conversations with each participant at a subsequent time to review the transcript of the interview and clarify any information that the participant may have wanted to clarify. The interviews were recorded, coded, and the originals kept in a locked safe where they will remain for five years following the conclusion of the study. After five years the recordings will be destroyed.

Anonymity was maintained by removing all identifying information and using an identifying code for each participant. The codes were known only to the researcher. The researcher maintained a list of codes so information could be relinked if follow-up questions were required. No names or school divisions have been used in the presentation of results. All data were stored on a specified flash drive during the research time. The flash drive was then locked in a personal safe where it will remain for five years after the conclusion of the study. After the five years, the flash drive will be wiped of data. Only the researcher has had, and will have, access to the flash drive both during and after the completion of the research.

Procedures

Before beginning the research, approval was sought and granted by the Brandon University Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix A). This study was deemed to be one of minimal risk to participants. The probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated during the research was not greater than any ordinarily encountered during regular daily life or during the performance of routine physical examinations or tests.

Participants were chosen from reviewing rural divisional websites to discover which schools were implementing RTI with their students. Once these school divisions and schools were recognized as RTI schools, the researcher contacted the superintendents for permission to contact the individual school administrators. In most cases, the superintendents contacted the administrators and then forwarded names to the researcher. The researcher contacted the individual administrators by email for consent and then to organize an appropriate time to phone to complete the interview process. This was a mutually agreed upon time. Interviews were completed between March and May of 2017. Once all interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed the recorded interviews for later analysis.

Data Analysis

Since the study used interviews as a data collection tool, the interviews were transcribed. In the initial stages, the questions of the interview protocol formed a useful structure for data analysis and so data was sorted on a question by question basis. Withing the responses on each question of the protocol, themes and patterns of experiences became evident and were coded for analysis (Vaughn &Turner, 2016). The researcher used these themes and patterns, such as communication, using team meetings, making staff part of the process and planning, and building relationships as guides to organizing the further breakdown and discussion of the results.

Validity

In qualitative research, validity is the degree to which qualitative data accurately gauges what we are trying to measure. Areas of consideration consist of descriptive, interpretative, theoretical or construct validity, and evaluative validity (Gay et al., 2009).

Descriptive validity refers to the fact that researchers must ensure that they are not distorting anything they see or hear by making up events that are based on inferences. In this study, participant's comments were recorded as audio files and then transcribed from those files to documents. The participants each had an opportunity to review these transcripts to check for accuracy. Moreover, the researcher ensured that the same questions and prompts were used with all participants to ensure validity in the study.

Interpretive validity ensures that all words and actions of the participants must be interpreted accurately. In this study, as part of the transcript review, participants also had the opportunity to clarify meanings from the transcripts of their interviews.

Theoretical or construct validity relates to how well the study measures what it claims to measure. In this study, the construct of RTI has a well-defined and agreed-upon definition in the field. Further, the data on sizes of schools studied serves to effectively operationalize what is meant by a small rural school.

Evaluative validity enables the researcher to present the data without being judgemental In this study, the researcher triangulated data from six administrators who reflected a larger pool of administrators involved in implementing RTI in their school settings. Threats to validity were minimized to ensure that good conclusions were drawn when reporting findings from the participants.

Reliability

Reliability concerns "the quality of measurement. In its everyday sense, reliability is the 'consistency' or 'repeatability' of your measures" (Trochim, 2006). Efforts to ensure reliability included the use of multiple sources in a variety of schools. The use of a standard interview protocol also helped to ensure that results would be consistent among different interviewers. In

terms of test-retest reliability, the researcher feels that that the use of interviews to collect data would have been more reliable had participants been involved in the study over a longer period. However, the longer the participants were involved in using RTI, the more their memories of their experiences may have changed. Further, the data collected may be reflected on differently by the participants as more years pass since implementation. Aspects of how implementation came about maybe forgotten or not accurately remembered by the participants. Accordingly, it is hoped that this snapshot in time across a group of different schools and administrators may provide a reliable representation of the phenomenon while memories were still fresh.

Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed and alternative group of criteria that could ensure the quality and worth of qualitative research work. These criteria include credibility or trustworhiness, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. ("Lincoln and Guba's evaluative criteria", 2008; "Credibility of research results", 2011).

Credibility involves ensuring the truth or trustworthiness of the findings. Strategies to ensure credibility include prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking. In this research study, both triangulation and member checking (Birt et. al., 2016) were employed.

Transferability involves the ability to apply the findings of one study to other jurisdictions. This study has attempted to use thick description of the school environments (supported by data on population, grade levels, extracurricular offerings, meal programs, class composition, and socioeconomic status) that form the data set. This, in combination with the triangulation mentioned previously, will give the reader a better understanding of the breadth and

the limits of this study's applicability to other settings, depending upon the degree of similarity or difference between this group of schools and the reader's school context.

Dependability describes the confidence with which another researcher could be confident in finding similar results in a replicated study. In the case of this study, an effort has been made to ensure dependability by providing as much detail as possible on the method of participant selection and recruitment, gaining approval and consent, scheduling and conducting interviews, design of interview protocols, and coding and analysis of data following interviews. In this way it is hoped that someone wishing to replicate and test the findings of this study would have a clear enough road map to do so faithfully.

Finally, confirmability relates to researcher bias or researcher neutrality. In this case the researcher has undertaken this study as an effort of discovery rather than one of confirmation. The goal of the study has been to discover rather than to confirm any particular hypothesis. Therefore, it can be claimed the researcher is not bringing a particular perception to the table. Further, methods within the study itself such as triangulation and member checking were included in an effort to bolster the sense of confirmability of this study.

This chapter has outlined the methodology used for the study and provided a description of the research design, research instruments, researcher, setting, participants, procedures and data analysis. Chapter Four reports the findings of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR

Findings

Much can be learned from the experience of others. This chapter reviews the experience of administrators from rural school divisions in Manitoba. These administrators have implemented RTI in the early/middle years areas of their schools. They have been responsible for leading their staff, both teaching and support staff, in using RTI as a school-wide intervention to support all students. As administrators implement programs and supports in their schools, they are faced with a variety of decisions that must be weighed for the benefit of the students. This chapter will discuss their experiences and their advice to the researcher, an administrator who was moving to implement RTI in a K-8 rural Manitoba school.

Demographics of the Schools Involved in the Research

It is important to understand the size and composition of a school to understand how the school operates. Question number one focused on the size, student body, demographics, challenges or special needs of each school. The participating schools varied in size, socio-economic status, number of funded students, staffing size, and options that are available to their students. The student populations in this study ranged from 99 to 460 during the 2017-2018 school year (see Figure 2). These were grades K-6, K-8, and K-12 rural Manitoba schools (see Figure 3). Students were primarily Caucasian plus several self-declared First Nations students, and Serbian, Filipino, African, and Swahili families. The administrators considered their schools to be from low to affluent in socio-economic status (see Figure 4). Staffing size ranged from 9 to 35 professionals and 5.5 to 20 support staff. Each school had many level I students and up to six level II and III funded students. All schools reported a variety of extra-curricular activities for their students (see Figure 5). The schools also reported a variety of breakfast and lunch options

that were available to their students, with some schools not offering breakfast or lunches daily (see Figure 6).

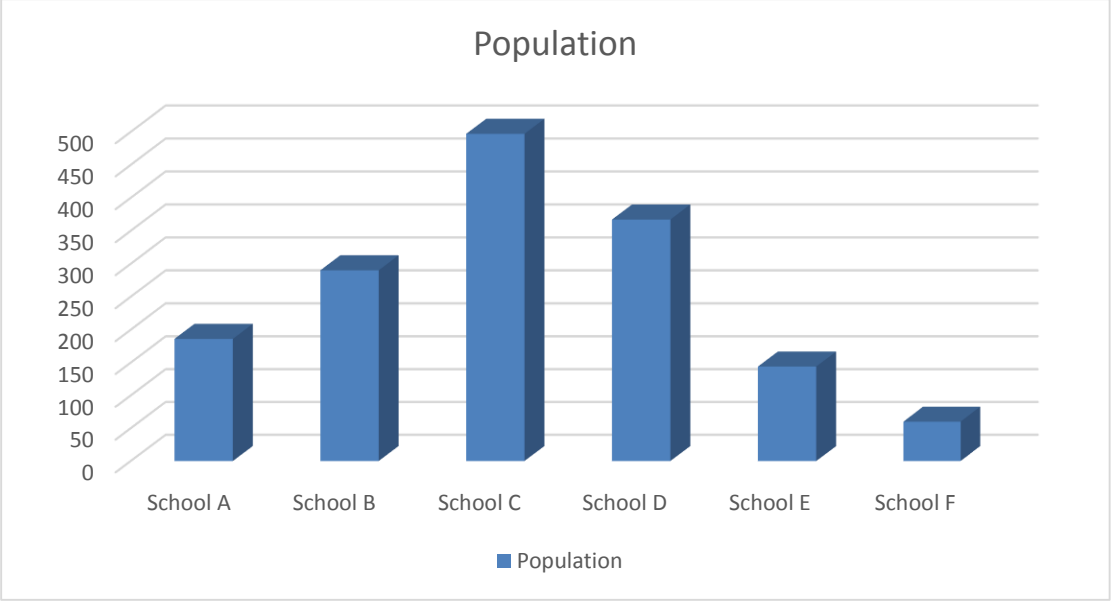

Figure 2: Student Populations

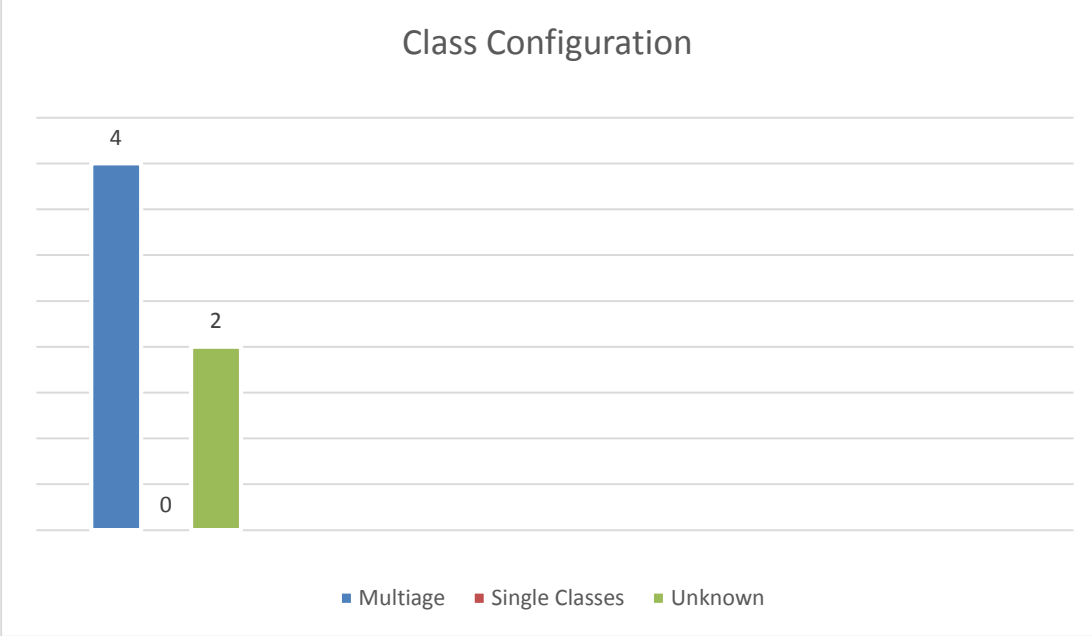

Figure 3: Class Configuration

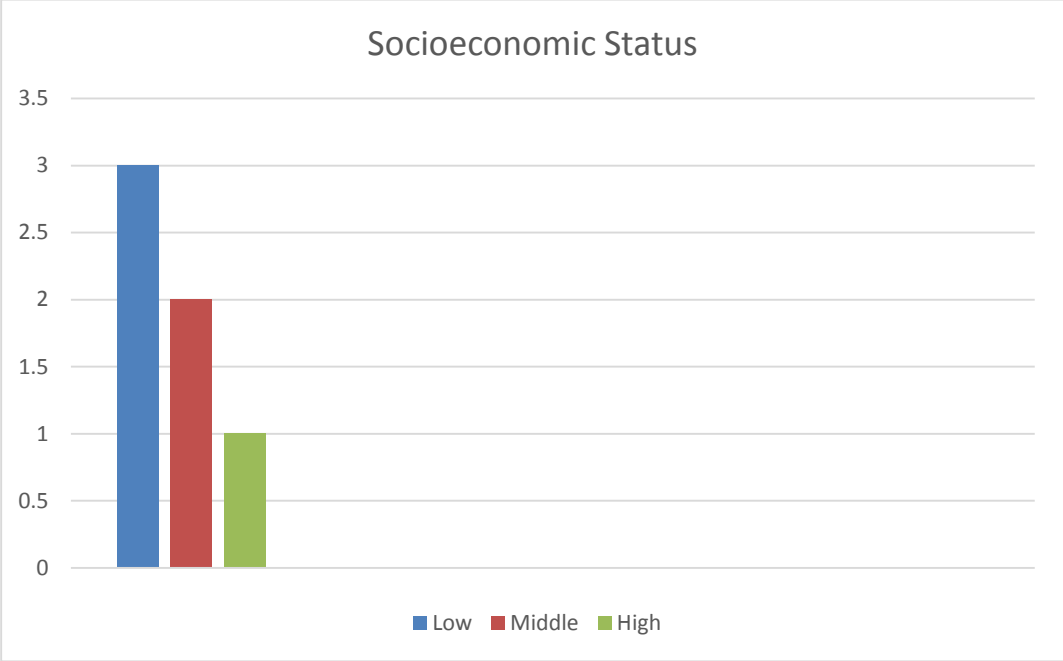

Figure 4: Socioeconomic Status

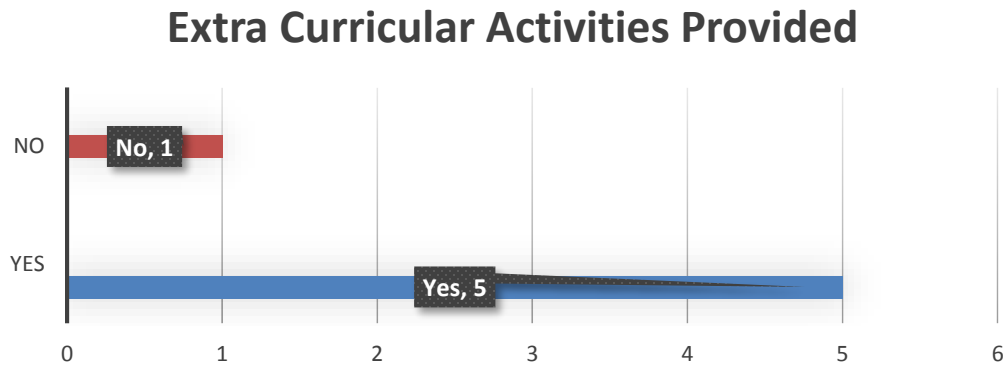

Figure 5: Extra Curricular Activities Provided to Students

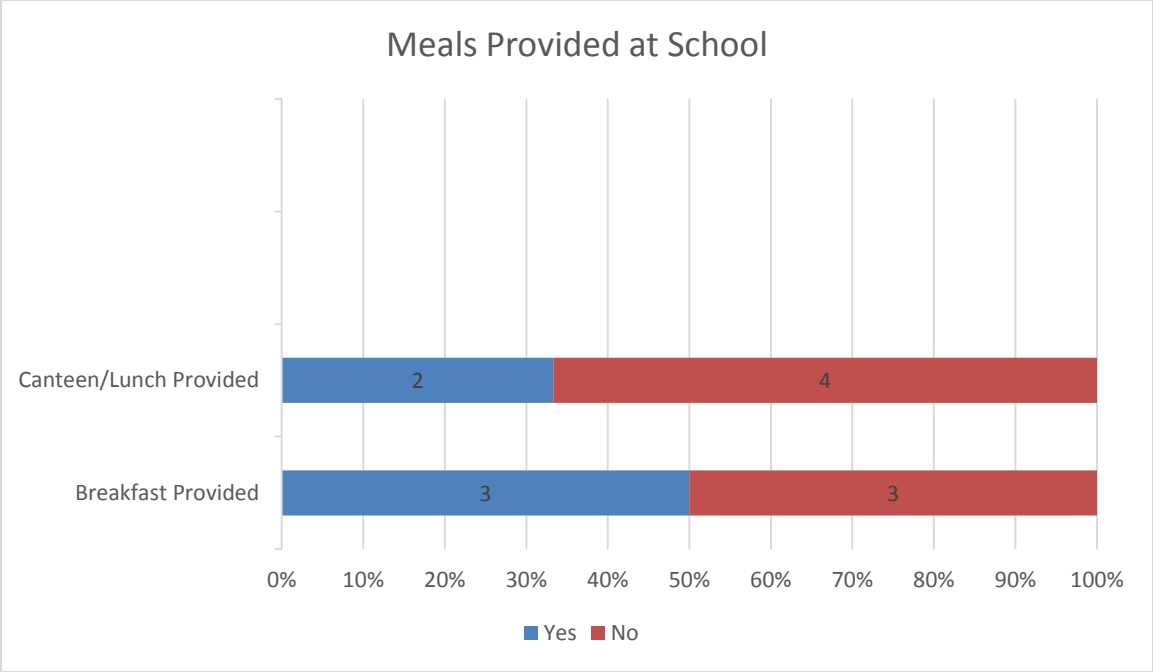

Figure 6: Meals Provided at School

Making the Decision To Implement RTI

The decision to implement a program such as RTI typically emerged in response to a perceived need. How this process began and who took the initiative to suggest such a program was dependent on each individual school, staff, and students. Participant 1 stated:

> I felt that there were lots of needs, and I guess as administrator I was questioning whether or not we were maximizing the resources that we had available. It felt like we needed to streamline the process somewhat. That was the big conversation that we had. How can we make sure that we are having a formalized system in place to make sure that we are using every bit of resources that we're provided to the best of their ability?

Participant 1 also had many questions when entering into the school as the new administrator. The timetable was a concern, with multiple teachers being responsible for a block

of RTI time. Questions concerning how staff knew which interventions to use and tools to use to measure growth were at the forefront in raising awareness of the need for changes.

Decisions were often made for different reasons and by different people than the ones who were in the decision-making role at the time. Participant 2 stated:

> A number of years ago the Division supported training a number of teachers, resource teachers, and administrators, [and they all] went to a 3-day conference to learn about RTI. Then the Division supported that training and our Student Services Coordinator also supported it. When we have our student services meeting and our resource teachers are well versed in it, we are supported in implementing it in our schools.

In another school, Participant 3 stated:

> I think it was something that I brought in when I did my school plan. That was how literacy was a focus within the plan, and basically just conversing and talking with other administrators throughout the Division about what was going on in their schools.

Sometimes the decision to enter RTI into a school came from a higher authority outside of the school, as in the case of Participant 4:

> The Division kind of forced it on everyone, but at the same time I think because this is a small school it's always been done, because of the nature of the fact that everyone knows each other and every time a need comes up it gets attacked. I think it was a push from [the superintendent], and I think it was the right model to use to have to start giving direction because we had a lot of resource teachers who had kind of moved into their positions,

> and to have them able to realize what they should be looking at in the building, and realize that if we're teaching the right way, these are the kids we should be able to reach.

Participant 5 was also not an administrator when RTI was implemented in the school. The decision was again made by senior administration, specifically, the assistant superintendent/ student services coordinator due to the frequency of changes in the superintendent's position. This was a decision made in the five-year divisional plan for implementation. All schools in the division would fully implement RTI in their early/middle years schools over the five years.

RTI was also introduced into the schools via professional development attended by senior administration, student services coordinators, and administrators. Participant 6 was introduced in this way:

> The Student Services Superintendent heard about this RTI conference in Winnipeg a few years ago [and thought that] it was something that we should take a look at, and so about six staff attended the conference. It was closely connected to professional learning communities work, but then it goes further in terms of providing structure. This was a big "ah-ha" moment for us. This is a structure that we can maybe get behind, and it was decided [that is was] a good idea for the division.

The decision to implement RTI in the school can be initiated by a variety of people in a variety of roles and for a variety of reasons. The ultimate reason is to support students in the areas that are most needed by the student. Whoever makes the decision has observed the need in the school to provide better support for students. They have researched, attended professional development, participated in conversations with colleagues, and made observations themselves.

This has led each of them to make the decision to implement RTI in their respective schools or divisions. These decisions have all been rooted in what is best for the students in their charge.

Experiences Encountered in Implementing RTI

Implementing a new program or a new way of doing things can be a large task, no matter the size of the school. Implementation requires all staff, professional and support staff, to understand RTI, the benefits of the program, their role in ensuring success for students, and the assurance that mistakes will be made and that all will learn from them. It is the risk-taking that will be most beneficial for the students. Each administrator, school, and division was faced with a different set of experiences when entering the implementation phase of RTI.

RTI was introduced to staff members in a variety of ways. It may have been through a presentation to share the administrator's vision of using RTI to support a school. It may have involved chosen staff members (resource teachers, classroom teachers, administrators, superintendents, etc.) attending professional development in a variety of cities. Sharing of documents with school staff was another of the way of introducing staff to RTI.

Finding ways to have staff become educated on RTI, take an interest, and buy into the process of implementation were the next steps of implementation. Participant 1 stated:

> I spoke to our staff at the end of the last year, about the vision . . . where RTI . . . could support a school. Whether it's a school of 100 or a school of 250 like us.

According to Participant 1, RTI can work in any school of any size, as long as there is a vision and an action plan.

The participants shared a variety of strategies that they used to educate their staff members on the model. These included sharing information from conferences with the whole

group, sharing professional readings with staff, and sending more and more people to professional development activities on RTI. Participants found that it was helpful to assist staff members to recognize the benefits of RTI at very early stages of the implementation process if possible, listen to staff member concerns, and be prepared to answer questions.

All participants recognized that some of their staff were more open to the implementation process than others. This was the same with administrators who attended professional development with other administrators. Participant 6 explained:

> I wasn't really sure what to expect. I hadn't heard a whole lot about it, to tell you the truth. But when I went there, a lot of it was closely connected to professional learning communities, but then it goes further in terms of providing structure in terms of that kind of thing. And for myself and the two student services teachers from my school . . . it was like a big "ah-ha" moment for us. Maybe another administrator or two didn't fall as hard for the idea as we did, but we certainly came back thinking that this was a really good direction for us to be going.

Some participants, such as Participant 5, were faced with staff who felt that RTI was a waste of their time. It was important to spend time with these staff members to understand their perspectives, concerns, and stresses. Participant 5 found that part of the issue was that there was not a clear understanding of common assessments. Once this was settled, the process was more accepted by certain individuals. Participant 5 also found that staff members needed to realize that RTI was only an enhancement of the commendable things they were already doing. Participant 5 was vocal in sharing what s/he saw as teaching strategies that were already being done and which complemented RTI at the same time. Staff needed to hear affirmations that what

they were doing was right and provided benefits for the students. It was obvious to Participant 5 that building capacity was essential as the school began making RTI a part of their way of doing business. Once scheduling and common understanding were in place, the next pieces to consider were tracking the data and providing professional development focused on specific interventions for Tiers 2 and 3, as well as the differentiated instruction offered in Tier 1.

Participant 4 understood that building strong relationships brings about an easier implementation process for RTI. Staff who have been part of the school and community know the students from an early age. Communication is strong, and problems are addressed quickly and efficiently. One difficulty for this type of school is the lack of resources due to the size of the school.

Participant 2 also experienced the same issues concomitant with being a small school. The small staff size, limited resources, and time in a schedule were the biggest obstacles. In this school, each year began with creating classroom profiles and establishing needs in each classroom. The school team – the classroom teacher, resource teacher, guidance counsellor, speech-language pathologist, and outside professionals such as clinicians, social workers, and psychologists – would meet to establish the needs and begin to put supports into place. The team would then develop a plan, put supports in place, and reassess after a period. If gains were not seen, then the team would call in clinicians and decide whether formal assessments were required. RTI was also implemented during reading instruction in K-2, where grade level and group sizes fluctuated throughout the year.

Participant 1 shared that his/her school implemented an online referral process as a beginning point for setting an action plan for support. The referral includes an electronic form detailing the name of the student, the grade, whether the referral is academic, behavior or both,

student concern and expected outcomes. The RTI team would meet weekly to decide on the action plan based on the information from the online referral. Each referred student would have a case manager who would monitor the student and his/her progress. The classroom teacher would have input into the plan and then communicate with the case manager about progress. There had been a concern over whether the teachers would buy into the online referral because of the fear of being required to provide too much information. However, it was discovered that it was a quick form to complete, with more data given only as needed. Participant 1 also established a professional learning community in grades 1-2, 3-4, and 5-6. This easily supported RTI because teachers had more opportunities to collaborate, share interventions, and best practices. Participant 1 also stated:

> I heard positives from the referral form, just that it is quick. It was timely and that they knew they had a voice to get their concerns to our team. We, as a team, an RTI team, have decided that we need to do that more regularly now. We need to look at moving forward to next year. We're going to put it onto our monthly staff meetings, a RTI section. It will be a standing item. It might be one member of the RTI team talking about some Tier 1 kind of interventions that teachers can do within their classrooms.

RTI was organized differently for Participant 3. The school populations of K-3 and 4-6 were organized into groups based on skill levels. Skill gaps were targeted, and students could float among groups depending upon their needs at the time. Both teachers and educational assistants were responsible for supporting students in these groupings. Unique challenges arose as the school worked through the process. One major challenge was the disruption caused by staff changes and bringing new staff on board with the program. Timing and scheduling had also

been a challenge, but with cooperation these were worked out, also. A third challenge lay in the fact that the school also had a grades 9-12 student population who were focused on programming for credits. This also limited the number of staff available for the early/middle years, because some staff had responsibilities across the grades. This continues to be an area of concern during scheduling time.

Participant 6 attended professional development sessions by Mike Mattos ("Mike Mattos", n.d.), who is recognized as an expert on RTI. The professional development was very beneficial to this group. They purchased and shared resources by Mike Mattos within the school. A team from the school also visited a school that had RTI established as a part of their culture. Two schools had each sent staff to the same Mike Mattos professional development. However, there was a distinct difference between how the two schools were able to have staff buy-in and use RTI. The process for Participant 6's school took place over a longer time period because more staff attended professional development and school visits. There were still staff members who were critical of the process and more hesitant to become involved. It has taken time and consistency to have RTI become a structure that is built into the culture of that school.

Results of the Implementation Process

As with all implementation processes, expected and unexpected outcomes are encountered. All the participants discussed expected and unexpected results of having RTI implemented in their schools.

Expected results were no surprise to anyone. Students needs were quickly recognized, and students were now getting the supports that they needed. Participant 3 explained that students were no longer falling through the cracks. Participant 5 added that student confidence grew as they enjoyed their scheduled time to work on targeted skills. Assessment results

improved as students' skill gaps closed and their confidence grew. Students relayed positive feedback to their teachers around their personal learning and growth.

Schools that entered a change of culture and program were looking to resolve concerns for their students, and often there were more changes for staff than there were for students. The administrators and the teachers involved noticed a marked change in the way they taught. Scheduling led to the ability to have common collaboration time. During this collaboration time, teachers could develop a common understanding of assessments and Tier 1 instructional practices. As they collaborated more, their practices became stronger and more to the point.

There was also a greater awareness of the need to articulate curriculum from grade to grade. Teachers understood that what they taught in grade 6 can, and does, affect what students may learn in grade 11 for example. They also recognized that many concepts taught in one grade may not be taught again until many grades later. The older grade teachers also learned that they may need to frontload some information again before moving on. This knowledge is very powerful for teachers to have as they plan for their students.

The understanding and use of data was an expected, as well as unexpected, area of growth for teachers while implementing RTI. As teachers became comfortable talking about data, they began to de-personalize the data they were seeing. This made it easier for them to work effectively with the data to support their students. After attending a professional development session entitled "Got Data" with Bruce Wellman (Lipton & Wellman, 2012), teachers no longer took the data personally, nor were they personally affected when interventions did not go well. Teachers could effectively distance themselves from the data and move forward. Teachers were positive toward the work they were doing.

As stated earlier, there are always unexpected results while implementing changes. Participants 3 and 6 found that the staff culture had become more collegial, collaborative and professional. Teachers were making decisions about essential learning outcomes and common assessment practices. Participant 1 stated that an unexpected result was that teachers were grouping students by skill sets instead of by abilities. This facilitated specific skill gaps to be addressed. It became more evident that they needed strong assessment tools. Participant 2 was surprised to see, based upon the beginning-of-year data, how many students were struggling at the beginning of each school year:

> For me, the unexpected results are seeing those assessments at the beginning of the year and really noticing how many students really struggle with comprehension, reading comprehension, that has been a bit of an eye-opener.

Participant 6 was able to schedule *What I Need* (WIN) time into schedules for students:

> Every four days for a half an hour, there are "What I need" times from K-8. So, K-4s will have it every day 1, and 5-8s will have every day 3, . . . that's with teachers. With the extra number of people teaching (teachers, student services teachers, administrators), pushing in the classroom, [we have] smaller groups across grade [levels] to work on particular academic outcomes or passion projects or that sort of thing. We're going to be building in more STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) stuff, genius hour stuff next year.

Participants' Advice on Implementation

Each participant had advice to share with the researcher. Much of this advice fell into one of four main categories: communication, using team meetings, making staff part of the process and planning, and building relationships.

It is extremely important to have open lines of communication throughout the process and among all staff members. A clear, solid focus needs to be communicated to everyone and followed through. People must spend time listening, providing support, and following up with emails. Teachers need an opportunity to talk with other teachers. They need to get together to pull curriculum apart, argue about it, and agree and disagree, in order to get a complete understanding of the curriculum and interventions. This gives them a chance to own the work they are doing. Staff need to see RTI as a formalized system so that students do not fall through the cracks. Staff meetings are a perfect time to share Tier 1 interventions.

Team meetings need to be established with set dates and times. They should be rescheduled immediately if they must be cancelled. Team meetings must have protected time. Each staff member needs to be part of the meetings. The school year should start with class profile meetings. Monthly meetings with the resource teacher should occur in order to keep information current. At these meetings, staff should review what is working, what is not working, and set up the next steps. An agenda should be set up that visits and revisits referrals, and adds on any new referrals as they are identified. Staff and administrators must ensure that conversations around outcomes and best teaching practices are research based. The more team members, the better. Team members should include classroom teachers, administrators, resource/student learning teachers, educational assistants, and guidance counsellors.

Participant 2 advised:

> From a resource and admin perspective I would advise individuals to hold regular meetings with each staff member. The resource teacher should be meeting with the classroom teacher once a month, on a prep to go in and just say, 'Okay, where are we now? We talked about these kids, is there anything you need from me? Or is there anything else that I can do?' Just to keep current. Let the teachers know that we are there for them and there to support them, especially with new staff because having students with great needs in the classroom can be so very overwhelming.

Staff need to be part of the process and planning from the start. They must see the need and be able to support the changes that are taking place. Participant 3 reported:

> For a small school, it's like what we were talking about. I didn't have any resistance by getting the teachers to "buy into" it by making them part of the process and planning. It's huge.

Buy-in can be an issue, but when everyone has the same understanding and recognizes the needs to be addressed, then they can feel confident in moving forward to support students. It becomes a whole staff initiative with everyone involved.

Relationship building was the fourth common theme. It is important that teachers feel comfortable with the guidance counsellor and resource staff. They must work openly and support each other. Staff must feel welcome to share and comfortable in taking risks together. Participant 4 explained:

> It's about relationships. It's about making sure the teachers are comfortable with your guidance and resource departments and so that they

> feel that they can ultimately work, and open up and realize that they are on the same team. It's like a little book that the resource department has that they don't want to really share because this student is facing challenges, maybe, and they've just come up that week. We don't share this because we're worried about what a teacher might think. You've got to treat everyone as professionals.

Other bits of advice were also shared. It is important to be flexible in what educators are willing to do, especially around scheduling. Monitoring what is happening, and adjusting as needed, are essential components of implementing RTI. The team must advocate for supports, resources, and time from administrators and those who have control over these matters. Money should be spent on resources that will support teachers with planning and interventions. Professional development should include visiting classrooms and schools that are working with the RTI framework. This allows staff to see RTI in action and give them another resource to communicate with. Support staff need to be relocated to areas in which they are needed and can make the most difference for students. They should not be in classrooms just because they have always been assigned to that room.

Participant 6 offered the following advice:

> Be sold on the idea that you are implementing. Have a thorough idea of what needs to happen when heading in the direction of implementing RTI. You need to have a big idea of what you are trying to accomplish. Then you can come up with where your culture needs to change, structures, timetables, and different changes to allow things to happen. No matter what somebody tells you that you have to go through, you have to go through it yourself to

> find the size or particular way of doing that suits your school. There's not a "one size fits all." You can't skip steps. And people are going to want to skip steps! And you can't. You can't skip the norms part, culture part, the identifying essential outcomes part. By skipping steps, then you're just going to say, "We tried RTI and it never worked for us. We didn't like it much, so we switched to something else a year later." Then you are just bouncing everywhere.

Participant 5 offered the following advice:

> Be committed and purposeful, and believe in what you do! Relentless pressure, applied gracefully!

Other Information Gleaned From the Interviews

Upon completing the interviews, each participant was given an opportunity to reflect on other aspects of RTI that they might consider. Participant 1 reflected on the need to build up the school resources, teacher instructional tools, and ways to track activities and data. Participant 2 believed that professional learning communities and RTI work go hand in hand. There needs to time built into the timetable in order to support the benefits of both. Participant 3 will continue to build on the successes that have been observed in his/her school. Participant 4 asserted:

> I think the biggest thing in a rural school is the fact that you feel like you're on an island and it's about having a team. New staff need to be acclimatized quickly. They need to be brought up to speed and get the community behind them too so that they feel comfortable approaching anyone on staff.

Participant 5 felt that anything that is of benefit of students is worth trying.

It's such an extensive program that really has potential to bring the school along, open up tremendous conversations around outcomes, and what is a really best teaching practice. If you want those conversations to happen in your building, then running RTI is a great way to do it.

Participant 6 believes that:

Tier 1 is good teaching for everyone. Teachers must try a lot of things before referring to the resource teacher or educational assistants to look after a student. This requires a lot of work from them, but they will see the benefits if they stick it out and do what is needed of them. RTI requires that everyone – student services, administrators – be in there, do some modelling, give people time, common prep time, and time to really get their teeth into more to get through some of these problems. It takes a whole team kind of commitment.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusions and Recommendations

RTI is being used throughout many countries to either directly support students or as a tool to refer students to special education. It is designed to meet the needs of even the most diverse learners, prevent academic failure, and identify students who need special education support. RTI is also being used for continuous school improvement. RTI is to provide "evidence-based interventions, the response to these interventions is used as a starting spot for determining instructional needs and intensity. RTI can also be used to provide early interventions in areas of need and to stop the unnecessary involvement of special education (Lakins, 2017).

Answers to the Research Questions

1. Describe your school in terms of its size, its student body, demographics, and challengs or special needs.

All of the schools were rural Manitoban schools. School populations ranged from 150-450 students in grades K-6, K-8 and K-12. RTI was implemented in the early/middle years grades in all of these schools. Students were primarily Caucasian plus several self-declared First nations students and Serbian, Filipino, African and Swahili families. The admistrators considered theire schools to be low to affluent in socio-economic status. Staffing size ranged from 9 to 35 professionals and 5.5 to 20 support staff. Each school had many level one students and up to six livel II and III funded students. All schools reported a variety of extra-curricular activities for their studetns. The schools also reported a variety of breakfast and lunch options that were available to their students, with some schools not offering breakfast or lunches daily.

2. Describe how the decision was made to implement a Response to Intervention program in your school.

The decision to implement a program such as RTI typically emerged in response to a perceived need. How this process began and who took the initiative to suggest such a program was dependent on each individual school, staff, and students. Questions arose around whether available resources were being maximized, how timetables were organized, and how well staff knew which interventions to use. Decisions were often made by different people than those who were in the decision-making role at the time. Depending on the situation, the decisions were made by student service coordinators, assistant superintendents and superintendents. All decisions were rooted in what is best for the students in their charge.

3. Describe your school's experience in implementing your RTI program.

RTI was introduced to staff members in a variety of ways. It may have been through a presentation to share an administrator's vision of using RTI to support a school. It may have involved chosen staff members (resource teachers, classroom teachers, administrators, superintendents, etc.) attending professional development in a variety of cities. Sharing of documents with school staff wan another way of introducing staff to RTI. Information was shared from conferences with the whole group, sharing professional readings with staff, and sending more and more people to professional development activities on RTI. Participants found that it was helpful to assist staff members to recognize the benefits of RTI at very early stages of the implementation process if possible, listen to staff member concerns and be prepared to answer questions. Some staff were more open to the implementation process than others. It was important to spend time with these staff members to understand their perspectives, concerns and stresses. Staff needed to hear affirmations that what they were doing was right and provided

benefits for the studnets. Once scheduling and common understanding were in place, the next pieces to consider were tracking the data and providing professional development focused on specific interventions for Tiers 2 and 3, as well as the differentiated instruction offered in Tier 1.

4. Describe the results of your implementation process, including both expected and unexpected results.

As with all implementation processes, expected and unexpected outcomes are encountered. Expected results were no surprises to anyone. Students needs were quickly recognized, and students were now getting the supports that they needed. Student confidence grew as they enjoyed their scheduled time to work on targeted skills. Assessment results improved as students' skill gaps closed and their confidence grew. Students relayed positive feedback to their teachers around their personal learning and growth. It was discovered that there were more changes for staff than there were for students. The administrators and the teachers involved noticed a marked change in the way they taught. Scheduling led to the ability to have common collaboration time, teachers could develop a common understanding of assessments and Tier 1 instructional practices. As they collaborated more, their practices became stronger and more to the point.

5. Describe what advice you would give to someone who is beginning the process of implementing RTI in a rural early/middle years school.

Advice from the participants fell into one of four main categories: communication, using team meetings, making staff part of the process and planning, and building relationships. It is extremely important to have open lines of communication throughout the process and among all staff. People must spend time listening, providing support, and following up with emails. Teachers need to talk with other teachers. They need to pull curriculum apart, argue about it,

agree and disagree, in order to get a complete understanding of the curriculum and interventions. Teachers need to own the work. Team meetings need to be established with set dates and times. Team meetings must have protected time with everyone actively participating. Staff must be part of the planning from the start. They must see the need and be able to support the changes that are taking place. It becomes a whole staff initiative with everyone involved. Staff must work openly and support each other. Staff must feel welcome to share and comfortable in taking risks together. The team must be flexible, willing to adjust and advocate for supports, resources and time from administrators. Money should be spent on resources that will support teachers with planning and interventions. Professional development should include visiting classrooms and schools who are working with the RTI framework.

6. Are there any other topics or issues that you feel are releant and should be discussed?

Participants shared a variety of reflections. There is a need to build up the school resources, teacher instructional tools and ways to track activities and data. Professional learning communities and RTI work hand in hand. Thee needs to be time built into the timetable in order to support the benefits of both. Staff need to continue to build on the successes that are observed in the school. Tier 1 is good teaching for everyone. Teachers must try a lot of things before referring to the resource teacher or educational assistants to look after a student. RTI requires that everyone be in there, do some modelling, give people time, common prep time, and time to really get their teeth into more to get through some of thes problems. It takes a whole team kind of commitment.

Limitations

As stated earlier, RTI has been implemented in many countries. Schools in urban and rural divisions have been implementing RTI to support all students, identify those who require

special education, and to make school improvements. This thesis study focused on early/middle years schools in rural Manitoba. A small number of schools and administrators participated in the research, so the findings represent a small percentage of rural Manitoba early/middle years schools who have implemented RTI. It is the researcher's belief that had the research participants been a larger number, the findings would be much the same: however, this remains unproven at this time.

Implications and Recommendations for Practice

Patterns are evident in the data collected from the research. These were all schools under 460 students and were rural Manitoba early/middle years schools. Teachers, students, families, and community members knew each other well. Decisions around implementing RTI were made because of the what the educators experienced in teaching reading and writing. The need was also seen by school administrators and superintendents. While the impetus for adopting RTI came from a variety of different agents, the ultimate decision to implement RTI was rooted in what was best for the students.

Each RTI program had a different set of experiences during the implementation process but, some patterns emerged. It was important that all staff members were part of the planning and implementation process from the start. The whole staff needed to participate in order to ensure that the process was successful. The vision and action plan needed to be clear and understood by everyone. A variety of professional development opportunities were required around the purpose of RTI as well as in using interventions to support student needs. Professional development was shared in a variety of ways: attending conferences, sharing research articles, visiting classrooms and schools, and providing common prep time for team conversations.

Important advice gleaned from the research fell into four categories: communication, using team meetings, making staff part of the process, planning, and building relationships. Communication needs to be clear, concise, and followed through. Staff need to have an opportunity to speak and be listened to; their ideas and concerns need to be taken seriously. They need the opportunity to work directly with other staff members, talking through issues, making connections, and digging deeply into curriculum. Opportunities to meet must be protected time, rescheduled if cancellations occur, and set with agendas and minutes. Staff must work toward building relationships to ensure an atmosphere of comfort, risk-taking, and sharing of interventions that work well and not so well.

There must be flexibility in scheduling for all staff and students. Consistent monitoring of what is happening, and the needs of staff and students, is essential in implementing RTI effectively. Administrators must be prepared to spend money on resources and supports. Professional development must be ongoing, effective, and seen as effective by all staff throughout the implementation process. Staff need to be allocated to where the needs of the students are greatest.

The most important piece of guidance shared by participants was the necessity to be committed wholeheartedly to the idea of RTI before beginning the process of implementation. Administrators must have the big idea firm in their minds and be able to move staff and students through the process with confidence, using small steps, in a logical manner, and with a vision and focus. Administrators must offer support and pressure as needed to ensure all staff are implementing best teaching practices for Tier 1 students and integrating Tier 2 interventions to support their students. Administrators must ensure the validity of assessments, data collection,

and analysis of the data. RTI implementation is a team approach to support all students in their learning and close any gaps that are currently existing.

Based upon this study, completed with a small set of participants from rural early/middle years Manitoban schools, it seems evident that RTI can be implemented in rural schools in a fashion that supports students. The advice given by all participants is informative, and easily followed by administrators who are about to begin the process of implementing RTI in their own early/middle years Manitoban schools. Successful implementation of RTI can answer the question "We need to do something but what?" Keeping a clear focus, sharing a vision, and supporting staff and students will lead to successful implementation and successful supports for all students attending the school. Strong Tier 1 teaching and assessments, with quality interventions in Tier 2, and individualized support in Tier 3 will lead to measurable gains in school and student performance and engagement.

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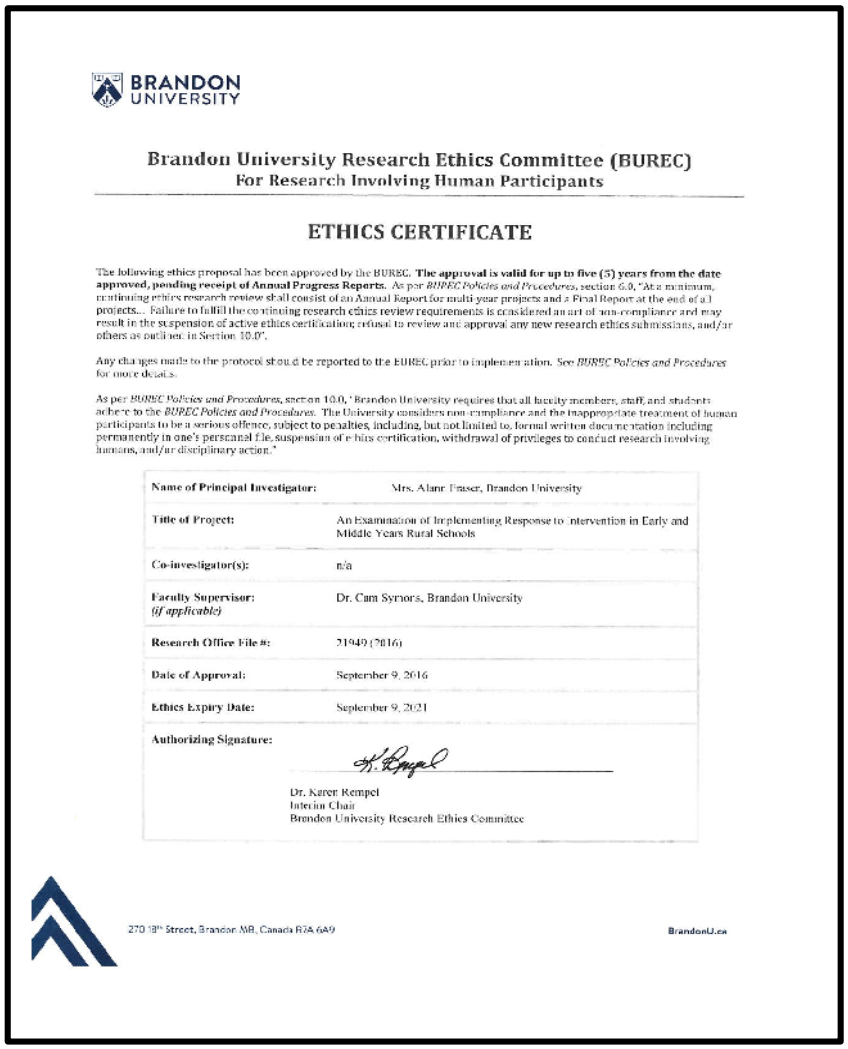
Appendix A:

Ethics Certificate



BRANDON UNIVERSITY

Brandon University Research Ethics Committee (BUREC)
For Research Involving Human Participants

ETHICS CERTIFICATE

The following ethics proposal has been approved by the BUREC. **The approval is valid for up to five (5) years from the date approved, pending receipt of Annual Progress Reports.** As per *BUREC Policies and Procedures*, section 6.0, "At a minimum, continuing ethics research review shall consist of an Annual Report for multi-year projects and a Final Report at the end of all projects... Failure to fulfill the continuing research ethics review requirements is considered an act of non-compliance and may result in the suspension of active ethics certification, refusal to review and approval any new research ethics submissions, and/or others as outlined in Section 10.0".

Any changes made to the protocol should be reported to the BUREC prior to implementation. See *BUREC Policies and Procedures* for more details.

As per *BUREC Policies and Procedures*, section 10.0, "Brandon University requires that all faculty members, staff, and students adhere to the *BUREC Policies and Procedures*. The University considers non-compliance and the inappropriate treatment of human participants to be a serious offence, subject to penalties, including, but not limited to, formal written documentation including permanently in one's personnel file, suspension of ethics certification, withdrawal of privileges to conduct research involving humans, and/or disciplinary action."

Name of Principal Investigator:	Mrs. Alana Fraser, Brandon University
Title of Project:	An Examination of Implementing Response to Intervention in Early and Middle Years Rural Schools
Co-investigator(s):	n/a
Faculty Supervisor: *(if applicable)*	Dr. Cam Symons, Brandon University
Research Office File #:	21949 (7816)
Date of Approval:	September 9, 2016
Ethics Expiry Date:	September 9, 2021
Authorizing Signature:	Dr. Karen Rempel Interim Chair Brandon University Research Ethics Committee

270 18th Street, Brandon MB, Canada R7A 6A9 BrandonU.ca

Appendix B:

Interview Protocol

1. Describe your school in terms of its size, its student body, demographics, and challenges or special needs?
2. Describe how the decision was made to implement a *Response to Intervention* program in your school?
3. Describe your school's experience in implementing your *RTI* program?
4. Describe the results of your implementation process, including both expected and unexpected results?
5. Describe what advice you would give to someone who is beginning the process of implementing *RTI* in a rural early/middle years school?
6. Are there any other topics or issues that you feel are relevant and should be discussed?

Appendix C:

Letters of Initial Contact

Date: _____

Dear Superintendent:,

I am currently working on a thesis while completing my Master of Education Degree in Educational Administration at Brandon University. My thesis is entitled **An Examination of Implementing *Response to Intervention* in Early and Middle Years Rural Schools**. The purpose of the study is to investige the experience and outcomes of implementing *Response to Intervention (RTI)* in rural, early and middle year schools. I will also be investigating unexpected challenges that were encountered during the implementation process.

I am writing to ask your permission to invite selected principals within your School Division to participate in this research study. With your permission, I would like to contact the principals who participated in implementing *Response to Intervention* strategies within their schools. Principals will be invited to participate in a recorded telephone interview of about 30-60 minutes addressing the following questions:

1. Could you describe your school in terms of its size, its student body, demographics, and challenges or special needs?
2. Could you describe how the decision was made to implement a *Response to Intervention* program in your school?

3. Could you describe your school's experience in implementing your *RTI* program?
4. Could you describe the results of your implementation process, including both expected and unexpected results?
5. What advice would you give to someone who is beginning the process of implementing *RTI* in a rural early/middle years school?
6. Are there any other topics or issues that you feel are relevant and should be discussed?

Principals would also be asked to spend approximately 10 minutes with me at a later time to review the transcript of their interviews and clarify any information that they wish.

The identity of all participants and all school or division identifiers will be protected in any presentations and publications through the use of pseudonyms. Neither individual names nor school or school division names or other identifying information will appear in the results.

If you grant permission for me to go ahead, the next step would be for me to contact individual principals in your Division by email. They would be provided with information on the study and invited to participate. A consent form which outlines all the protections to which they are entitled as participants will be provided, and by signing the form principals can give their individual consent to be interviewed.

The consent form that participants sign will indicate to them that they:

- Will be identified only by a code number known only to the researcher;
- Will not have any other identifying information about the school or community included in the transcript data;
- Will have ongoing consent, meaning that they may withdraw from the study at any time if they so decide;

- Will be free to decline to answer any question they wish not to answer;

The data from interviews of all principals in all participating school divisions will then be collated, interpreted, and presented in thesis form. The thesis itself will be presented to my thesis committee and other interested individuals at Brandon University. After its acceptance by the University, it will become accessible to the general public through the *Canada Thesis Portal*. I will also be happy to provide you with a copy of the completed thesis at your request.

This research has been approved by the Brandon University Research Ethics Committee (BUREC), any questions about ethical matters can be directed to burec@brandonu.ca or (204) 727-9712. The risks of this study are minimal to none, and benefits may be realized by providing information for other schools and divisions who are undertaking their own RTI initiatives to support student learning.

Should you provide me with permission to speak with these principals, please sign the consent form on the following page and return it to me at the contact address provided by October 1, 2016. If you have any questions about this request, please contact me. If you do not wish principals within your school division to participate, please disregard this information.

Sincerely,

Alann Fraser

Box 11

Hilbre MB

(204) 302-1419

alannm@mymts.net

Faculty of Education
270-18th Street
Brandon MB R7A 6A9
(204) 727-9616

Date:

Dear Principal:

I am currently working on a thesis while completing my Master of Education Degree in Educational Administration at Brandon University. My thesis is entitled **An Examination of Implementing *Response to Intervention* in Early and Middle Years Rural Schools**. The purpose of the study is to investige the experience and outcomes of implementing *Response to Intervention (RTI)* in rural, early and middle year schools. I will also be investigating unexpected challenges that were encountered during the implementation process. I have received permission from your Superintendent, _____, to contact you as a potential participant. I am hoping that you may be able to help me in my study by being a participant. If you agree to participate, I would then arrange to have recorded telephone interview of about 30-60 minutes with you which would ask you to:

1. Describe your school in terms of its size, its student body, demographics, and challenges or special needs?
2. Describe how the decision was made to implement a *Response to Intervention* program in your school?
3. Describe your school's experience in implementing your *RTI* program?
4. Describe the results of your implementation process, including both expected and unexpected results?

5. Describe what advice you would give to someone who is beginning the process of implementing *RTI* in a rural early/middle years school?
6. Are there any other topics or issues that you feel are relevant and should be discussed?

I would also ask you to spend approximately 10 minutes with me at a later time to review the transcript of your interview and clarify any information that you wish.

The identity of all participants and all school or division identifiers will be protected in any presentations and publications through the use of coded pseudonyms. Neither individual names nor school or school division names or other identifying information will appear in the results.

To protect anonymity, as a participant in the study:

- You will be identified only by a code number known only to the researcher;
- You will not have any other identifying information about the school or community included in the transcript data;
- You will have ongoing consent, meaning that they may withdraw from the study at any time if you so decide;
- You will also be free to decline to answer any question you wish not to answer;

After all of my interviews have been completed, the data from interviews of all principals in all participating school divisions will then be collated, interpreted, and presented in thesis form. The thesis itself will be presented to my thesis committee and other interested individuals at Brandon University. After its acceptance by the University, it will become accessible to the general public through the *Canada Thesis Portal*. I will also be happy to send you an electronic copy of the thesis if you would like to read the final results.

This research has been approved by the Brandon University Research Ethics Committee (BUREC). Any questions about ethical matters can be directed to burec@brandonu.ca or (204) 727-9712. The risks of this study are minimal to none, and benefits may be realized by providing information for other schools and divisions who are undertaking their own RTI initiatives to support student learning.

If you are willing and able to participate, please sign the consent form on the following page and return it to me at the contact address provided by November 1, 2016. If you have any questions about this request, please contact me at alannm@mymts.net. I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Alann Fraser

Box 11

Hilbre MB R0C 1L0

(204) 302-1419

alannm@mymts.net

Appendix D:

Consent Forms

Superintendent's consent to contact principals to participate in the study

I, _____, hereby give consent for *Alann Fraser* to contact selected principals in _____School Division to invite them to participate in the research study entitled, *An Examination of Implementing* Response to Intervention *in Early and Middle Years Schools*.

I understand that principals will be invited to participate in an interview of 30 to 60 minutes addressing questions about the experience of their schools in implementing their RTI initiatives. I understand that the interview will be recorded and a transcript of the interview will be created, and that these data sources will be secured in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office and destroyed when no longer required.

I understand that the consent of principals will be voluntary. I understand that they may decline to answer any question if they so wish. I understand that they may withdraw from the study at any time.

I understand that all information which may identify a person, school, community, or school division will be coded to ensure anonymity.

I understand that by signing this consent form I do not waive my rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

_____	_____
Superintendent's Signature	Date
Please return by Oct. 1, 2016 to:	Alann Fraser
	Box 11
	Hilbre MB R0C 1L0
	(204) 302-1419
	alannm@mymts.net

Principal's consent to participate in the study

I, _____, am interested in participating in the study *An Examination of Implementing* Response to Intervention *in Early and Middle Years Schools*.

I hereby give consent for *Alann Fraser* to contact me to arrange an interview of 30 to 60 minutes addressing questions about the experience of my school in implementing its RTI initiative. I understand that the interview will be recorded and a transcript of the interview will be created, and that these data sources will be secured in a locked cabinet in the researcher's office and destroyed when no longer required.

I affirm that my consent is voluntary. I understand that I may decline to answer any question if I so wish. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

I understand that all information which may identify a person, school, community, or school division will be coded to ensure anonymity.

I understand that by signing this consent form I do not waive my rights to legal recourse in the event of research-related harm.

_____ _____

Principal's Signature Date

Please return by Nov. 1, 2016 to:

Alann Fraser

Box 11

Hilbre MB R0C 1L0

(204) 302-1419

alannm@mymts.net