

Response to Intervention through the Lens of One Middle School

by

Maribeth L. Doyle

A thesis submitted to the Department of Education of The College at Brockport, State

University of New York, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Education

May 13, 2016

### Abstract

This research study examines what Response to Intervention (RTI) looked like through the lens of one rural middle school in western New York. Data were collected through interviews with the special education teacher and the Academic Intervention Services (AIS) reading teacher, as well as observations of those teachers implementing RTI in two classrooms. This study is significant because it provides a real-world example of how RTI interventions are used in a middle school setting.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	5
Topic & Research Problem .....	6
Rationale.....	8
Purpose .....	8
Research Questions .....	9
<b>Literature Review</b> .....	9
Introduction .....	9
RTI Framework.....	10
Multi-Tiered System .....	11
RTI Processes .....	14
Essential Components of RTI .....	15
RTI in a Middle School.....	16
<b>Methodology</b> .....	18
Introduction .....	18
Participants .....	18
Setting .....	19
Positionality as a Researcher.....	20

RTI in One Middle School	4
Data Collection Methods.....	21
Procedures .....	21
Trustworthiness .....	22
<b>Data Analysis</b> .....	22
Finding One.....	23
Finding Two .....	28
Finding Three .....	35
<b>Discussion</b> .....	38
Summary of Findings .....	38
Conclusion One.....	39
Implication One .....	40
Conclusion Two .....	40
Implication Two .....	41
Conclusion Three .....	41
Implication Three .....	42
Limitations .....	42
Research Suggestions .....	43
Overall Significance.....	43
References.....	44

## Introduction

I began writing in a teaching journal three years ago when I started working at my first teaching job. Recently I accepted a new position and the following is an excerpt from my journal.

November 16, 2016

*I just got home from the first day at my new school, exhausted does not begin to describe how I am feeling after today. I knew that it was going to be different from my previous teaching position, but it is safe to say that I am a little out of my element when it comes to working with middle school students. I have worked as a Title I teacher in a small Catholic elementary school for the past three years, working with students from Kindergarten through sixth grade in both reading and mathematics. Today was my first day in my new position in a rural public school district at the middle school level, working specifically in a reading Academic Intervention Services (AIS) classroom. Coming from my former school, I have not been exposed to many things that go into being a teacher in a public school district, especially surrounding special education and the process of getting individual students the help they deserve. Much of what I have learned through both my undergraduate and graduate classes surrounding literacy is that it does not make a difference what grade a student is in, you can still teach them how to read using the same strategies.*

*Response to Intervention is a concept that I have learned about through courses I have taken, however, I have not had the opportunity to see it in action due to the different requirements private schools have versus public schools. Now that I will be working with middle school students on a daily basis, many of whom are classified into tier I, tier II, or tier III, I am very driven and interested to learn about the Response to Intervention (RtI) process and how it is implemented in the middle school I work at throughout the school year. I am anxious to learn about the processes that different teachers have to go through in order to make RtI successful in this school. I am ready*

*to learn what essential components must be present in the program in order to make it as successful as possible.*

This journal has become an excellent source for me to use to reflect on the way I teach, as well as reflect on how my lessons have impacted the students with whom I work. Although I was a Title I reading teacher for 3 years, I unfortunately did not have much direction when it came to providing interventions to students who had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) or 504 Plans. This made it very difficult to ensure that my students were receiving the best interventions that I could provide, with the resources that I had available to me in that setting. When I was offered my new position I challenged myself to take on the role of learner, and research as much about RtI as possible.

### **Topic and Research Problem**

The National Center on Response to Intervention uses the following to define RtI,

Response to intervention integrates assessments and intervention within a multilevel prevention 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, 2010, pg. 1)

Response to Intervention (RtI) has been implemented in elementary schools across the country for many years. As a result, there is adequate research and studies that define what the essential components of a successful RtI program looks like at the elementary level. The main purposes of RtI at the elementary level include screening and prevention, early intervention, and disability determination. In contrast, RtI is implemented at the middle school level for different

purposes which include: building capacity, in order for schools to meet the demands of the diverse population of students, intervention, to support students at risk for dropping out of school, and continuous school improvement, which includes better teaching and learning through an integrated system (Johnson, Smith & Harris, 2009). RtI can look different within different school districts.

The problem is that I do not have a clear understanding of how the RtI process is implemented at the middle school level. Recently, I accepted a position as a Teaching Assistant in an Academic Intervention Services (AIS) reading classroom at the middle school level. The classroom that I am in provides reading support for students in grade 5 through 8 who struggle with reading. Through my time as a student majoring in elementary education as well as gaining four years of work at the elementary level, the way students are supported in middle school is a new concept for me to understand. As a result of this, I began questioning how the RtI process was used in order to service the students in need at the middle school level.

Prewett, Mellard, Deshler, Allen, Alexander, & Stern (2012) discussed the logistical and structural challenges that accompany the implementation of RtI processes which are unique to the middle school level. These challenges make progress monitoring and tiered intervention efforts more difficult because of the daily schedules and rigorous course work within content area classes (Prewett, Mellard, Deshler, Allen, Alexander, & Stern, 2012). When students enter the secondary grades, the setting of the school changes, with one of the biggest changes being the lack of a “classroom teacher.” Instead of having one teacher who sees the same group of students throughout the greater part of the day like in elementary school, teachers at the secondary level are focused on teaching to a specific content area.

Providing support to students does not end once the students leave elementary school and enter middle school. The support at the middle school level becomes imperative in order to ensure that students are not falling behind in the required course work. Although the most common

method of intervention at the primary school level is pulling students out of class, this system becomes much more difficult when students enter middle school. If a student is receiving an intervention in English, the student should not be pulled out of English class for this intervention. Interventions are meant to be supplemental, or in addition to the regular instruction that the student is receiving in a specific subject area. There are many challenges that exist at the middle school level have an impact on RtI, and according to Fitzell (2011), “Having adequate time to implement interventions is often the greatest challenge faced at the secondary level” (p. 6).

### **Rationale**

My research is significant because Response to Intervention strategies should not stop at the elementary level, but continue through middle and high school. It is important to having a more thorough understanding of what these interventions look like at the middle school level. Although some middle schools have begun to implement an RtI process, there is limited research available that provides information regarding how RtI is implemented in secondary schools. There is a need for more research, including specific case studies that will provide models portraying how an RtI model is used and implemented into a middle school setting. “At the secondary level, RtI is considered innovative, and the case study method has proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations for evaluating programs, and for informing policy” (Dulaney, 2012, pg. 10). Researching and learning about RtI, and how the process looks in a middle school setting is important for me in order to continue to be an effective teacher in the classroom in which I am assigned.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to determine how one middle school implements the comprehensive framework of Response to Intervention in order to meet the needs of struggling

readers. My goal was to use interviews and observations to collect data on what roles the special education teacher and the reading teacher play in this RtI model, as well as determine what the most essential components are of a successful RtI model in this specific middle school setting.

### **Research Questions**

I am interested in researching how one middle school implements Response to Intervention techniques as a way to meet the needs of all students. In order to gather data surrounding my research, I will focus on the following questions: What role does the middle school reading teacher play in the RtI process? What role does the middle school special education teacher play in the RtI process? What are the most important requirements for a successful RtI program? I will answer these questions through my research and determine where my position can fit in to helping this process be successful.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Introduction**

As defined by the National Center on Response to Intervention,

Response to Intervention integrates assessment and intervention within a multilevel prevention 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. (NCRTI, 2011, pg. 1)

Response to Intervention at the middle school level has sparked an interest among many researchers. The following literature review will discuss common themes that I discovered through my review of the literature. This section of the report will be broken into sections to address the

complexity of RtI. The subsections will include: RTI Framework, the implementation of a multi-tiered system, the processes involved in RtI at the middle school level, essential components of RtI in middle school, and the importance of having an RtI model at the middle school level. In each of the subsections, I will discuss the current research and findings relevant to the topic.

### **RTI Framework**

Response to Intervention was originally incorporated into The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that was reauthorized in 2004. This law was designed to guarantee that schools meet certain criteria directed at data-driven progress documentation of students who struggle with the essential components of reading. Howard discusses the purpose for RtI, stating “Its purpose is to reduce the number of learners referred to learning disabilities or special education programs by providing intensive and effective instruction before children begin to fail” (Howard, 2009, p. ix). The importance begins with the teachers at the elementary level, ensuring that they are teaching effectively, and using strategies that can make all students successful.

It has been determined that by supporting students, the majority of these students will have the opportunity to reach their potential. RtI is the example of one framework which has been designed to reduce the number of students that will be classified as having a disability. In many cases, once a student has been identified as having a disability, they carry around that label with them as they continue through school. In order to reduce the number of students that become labeled at a young age, it is imperative that educators use all possible resources they have available to them to help students before referring them for special education services (Allington, 2009). A Response to Intervention framework provides a school with a data driven system as a way to assure that student achievement is maximized.

## **Multi-Tiered System**

There is no single textbook definition that discusses how Response to Intervention should be implemented into a secondary school. RtI is a framework which can be manipulated and changed as a way to meet the needs of an individual school district. Different schools can choose to implement a three-tier, or four-tier system, however, “RtI is most often conceptualized as a three-tiered system” (Johnson, Smith, & Harris, 2009, p.1). Tier I of a three-tier RtI model is designed to be given at the general education level by the classroom teacher. Tier I requires the classroom teacher to use best practices, differentiated instruction, and methods that are research based as foundations for literacy instruction within the classroom.

Differentiated instruction is a term that should be familiar to any teacher. According to Tomlinson (2014) “teachers in differentiated classrooms accept and act on the premise that they must be ready to engage students in instruction through different approaches to learning, by appealing to a range of interest” (p. 4). In order for an RtI model to be successful, all Tiers of instruction must accomplish specific goals.

Tier I has been described by researchers as the most critical, fundamental, or universal stage of the RtI model because if the instruction that is given at the Tier I level does not reach every student in a way that will make him/her successful, students will need to be supported at the Tier II level. There have been some programs implemented at the middle school level that use student success combined with recommendations from teachers as a determinant of whether or not specific students would benefit from Tier II or Tier III interventions (Bender, 2012, p. 9). Tier I interventions have many components which include teachers using research based instructions to target all students in the general education classroom.

The purpose of Tier II interventions are to provide additional support to students who do not meet the goals that were expected of them during the implementation of the Tier I component.

Some students who are recommended for Tier II interventions, particularly in the subject of reading, show signs of being frustrated. The purpose of this next level of interventions is to reinforce and extend the teaching that is already occurring in the literacy classroom. Howard (2009) discusses that interventions implemented at the Tier II level, “focus on specific skills and strategies that address students’ learning needs. These skills and strategies are emphasized in meaningful contexts where students never lose sight of the ultimate goal of enjoying and understanding interesting texts” (Howard, 2009, p. 63). Tier II interventions should be supplemental to the content area in which students are receiving additional support.

If a student is receiving Tier II interventions in reading, the student should not be pulled out of his/her English class in order to receive the additional help in that specific area. Sometimes the classroom teacher provides these supplemental interventions to students, but sometimes the students receive the interventions from a different teacher. Goals are made for students at the Tier II level the hope that the students will meet the goals and have the opportunity to be moved back to a lesser Tier I intervention. Esteves & Whitten (2014) discuss how goals can be maintained at Tier II. “A measure called fidelity of implementation is put in place at Tier II to ensure proper and consistent implementation. Fidelity can be assessed in a number of ways, ranging from teacher observation to self-reporting of lesson effectiveness” (2014, p. 13). Instruction at Tier II provides targeted interventions that are centered on specific needs of students. At the middle school or secondary level the intensity of the interventions increases as a way to bridge the “instructional gap” between Tier I and Tier III (Johnson, Smith, Harris, 2009, p. 84). The Tier II interventions are frequently given in small group settings, multiple times a week for a minimum of thirty minutes per session. The teachers who are leading these Tier II interventions must also be aware of the importance of engaging and motivating the students in order to help them succeed.

For most RTI models Tier III is the highest tier of intervention for students. This level of intervention is beyond the classroom teacher, and student needs are supported through special education services. Johnson, Smith & Harris describe the main goal of Tier III to be, “to provide a level of services that is intense enough to support the academic and behavioral needs of students for whom Tiers I and II are insufficient” (Johnson, Smith & Harris, 2009, p.85). Tier III interventions fall under special education services. Secondary schools have guidelines they are required to follow in order to ensure that any student with a disability is receiving the interventions and supports that he/she needs in order to be academically successful. In many cases Tier III interventions are one-on-one intensive interventions.

There is debate among researchers regarding where the responsibilities lie when it comes to the Tier III interventions, specifically at the middle school level. Bender (2012) discusses that in middle and high school settings, the general education teachers are not held responsible for the direct delivery of Tier II or Tier III interventions, but instead the responsibility falls on the shoulders of the special education teachers, math teachers, or reading teachers. Once students are recommended for Tier II interventions, numerous data are gathered in order to determine the individual needs. By doing this, educators are able to individualize the interventions in ways that will meet the needs of the individual students who need to receive the Tier III interventions when they are in middle school. Brozo (2011) claims that even though there is a lack of scientific evidence for secondary-level RTI, numerous middle and high schools across the United States are moving ahead with tiered approaches to instructional interventions similar to those found in the early grades.

**RTI Processes**

NCRTI conducted a study surrounding the RtI process through which interviews with staff members and administrators were conducted at 42 middle schools across the country. NCRTI provided a four-step implementation suggestion for schools to follow when implementing the RTI process into a middle school. These four steps include: exploring and adopting, planning, implementing, and sustaining (NCRTI, 2011, pg. 13). The exploring step is the initial step to implementation, and it is during this stage that administration must look at the school or district, and make a determination regarding what the desired outcomes are of Response to Intervention. Johnson, Smith, & Harris (2009) suggest that schools who are looking to implement RtI should review the school's mission statement before implementing RtI. By creating goals from the beginning, the administration can more easily make a determination as to whether or not the implementation of the RtI process is successful within the school or district.

The planning stage of RtI requires a school to collect data which will help determine the students who will be benefiting from the Response to Intervention process. Many schools collect data on their students on a regular basis, and this data can be analyzed as a way to determine the specific needs of the students in the school. This planning process is also the time to get the individuals who will be working with RtI trained and knowledgeable about the process and how it will impact their schedules. (NCRTI, 2011)

The researchers used the information gathered from the subjects in this study to determine recommendations for other schools that are at the beginning stages of implementing the RTI process. The results of these conversations saw two suggestions emerge. The first suggestion that emerged from the conversation was for schools to only introduce one essential component of RtI at a time. It was suggested by those involved in the study that schools beginning the process start by only introducing one component of the process at a time, for example progress monitoring. This

component would be introduced throughout one school district simultaneously. The second suggestion that was determined was the idea that members of the staff at the middle school implement all essential components with a small group, such as one grade level, or one reading class as a way to create a model for a larger implementation. (NCRTI, 2011)

### **Essential Components of RTI**

In order for RTI to be successful there are numerous components of the RTI model that must all be used cohesively to ensure that the needs of all students are being met. According to the National Center on Response to Intervention (NCRTI, 2013), the components that are often referred to as the essential components of RTI include: universal screening, progress monitoring, multi-level prevention system, and data-based decision making. The NCRTI provides detailed descriptions of each of these stages of the implementation process. Screening data are used to determine students' initial risk status and evaluate the overall strength of a school, district, or grade level's instructional program. The multi-level prevention system is inclusive of three levels of intensity. The first level is high-quality core instruction; the second level has evidence-based intervention with moderate intensity, and the third level consists of individualized intervention(s) of increased intensity for students who do not show a great enough response at the secondary level (NCRTI, 2013).

Howard (2009) discusses essential principles of RTI. The first principle is that time is a precious commodity. Howard describes this principle using the statement, "every minute spent on RTI should count" (pg. 30). By making authentic activities a high priority by building daily schedules around them and ensuring the resources are available to support these events, there will be more time to make informed decisions about the RTI process being used. The second principle is that one size fits few, meaning that each child brings something different to the literacy table, therefore each child's need cannot be met in the same way. The next principle Howard describes is that intensity is the greatest equalizer. Once students are assessed, additional and more intense

instructional support is offered to the students who are identified as needing this assistance. Another principle that Howard discusses is the power of “double dipping.” The idea behind this is to provide students both classroom and alternative support concurrently as the basis for meeting their needs. It is important for students to take the strategies and skills they learn and apply to other texts, tasks, or contexts (Howard, 2009).

### **RTI in a Middle School Setting**

Teachers at the middle school level are at a certain disadvantage when it comes to instructional strategies for interventions because they have to focus on the core curriculum as well as a specific subject area. Students in middle school attend multiple classes each day, and each of those classes are taught by a different teacher. Teachers across the different disciplines will most likely not be using the same teaching strategies to address the needs of individual students. Instead, teachers will teach to the whole class using strategies. “Students will benefit most when schools choose three or four learning strategies to teach consistently across all content areas” (Esteves, & Whitten, 2014, p.19). Unfortunately not all teachers can successfully implement strategies that they are not as familiar with, especially if they have been teaching for many years. Students need to be given tools that they can use across multiple content areas throughout middle and high school in order to be successful.

Esteves and Whitten (2014), discuss the importance of collaboration in order for an RTI model to be successful in a middle school setting.

In order for RTI to work properly, everyone has to be on board- including students. RTI requires a shift in the way we think about who is responsible for teaching and learning. Students must see themselves as accountable for their own learning, and as meaningful

participants in, contributors to, and collaborators in the school community. (Esteves & Whitten, 2014, p.2)

Teachers are not the only individuals in the school that have a responsibility in the implementation process. Students who are involved in this process also have an obligation to their own learning to be active participants in the interventions that are being implemented. The teachers in the school are there to ensure that each student is receiving the interventions that he/she deserves, and if the students choose not to actively participate they are doing themselves a disservice.

Dulaney (2012) provides a qualitative case study surrounding the efforts that one middle school used to implement the Response to Intervention process. The study that was conducted resulted in four major findings. The first finding was that school leaders need to take time to come up with one idea that demonstrates the how and why of the implementation in order to prepare the administrators for what is to come. Also, it was determined that the leaders must establish available resources, giving time to build and maintain the process of RTI. Next, the entire school community, including parents, must agree to participate in data-driven decision making. The last finding was that teachers must be prepared by participating in professional development in order to ensure the students are progressing.

### **Literature Review Summary**

I discovered three themes to the research: the process of RTI, the essential components of RTI, and what RTI looks like in a middle school setting. There is limited research on how RTI is best implemented at the middle school level. As a result, I believe that it is important that more research studies be conducted in middle schools to determine how RTI can be most effectively implemented at the middle school level in order to meet the needs of all students.

## **Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to determine how one middle school implements the comprehensive framework of Response to Intervention in order to meet the needs of struggling readers. I used interviews and observations to collect data on what roles the special education teacher and the reading teacher play in this RtI model. I determined the essential components that must exist in order to create a successful RtI model in this specific middle school setting.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study were the two teachers who play an active role in the RtI process at this middle school. These two teachers were the middle school special education teacher and the middle school reading AIS teacher. These teachers meet frequently, along with the Instructional Support Services Team (ISST) to discuss students who have Individualized Education Programs (IEP), students who have 504 plans, as well as students who receive special education services.

I learned that the special education teacher has been teaching for three years, and all three years have been in her current position. She is the special education teacher for the middle school and works with students from fifth grade through eighth grade. She is qualified for this position because she holds a special education Master's degree from a private college. She is a white, middle class woman in her mid-twenties.

The AIS reading teacher has been in her current position for two years. Before working at this school, she worked in the western United States for 10 years before relocating and starting a family. She stayed home with her children for many years before returning to the teaching

profession just two years ago. This teacher earned a special education Bachelor's degree, as well as a literacy Master's degree. She is a white, middle class woman in her early fifties.

### **Setting**

The setting of this study was in a rural middle school south of a mid-sized city in western New York. The town that this school was located in has a population of 7,164 as of the 2010 census (Census.gov, 2010). The community was made up of low and middle socioeconomic status housing. The district was made up of two different school buildings. In this district, there was an elementary school that housed grades 1-4, and there was a second building that housed the middle and high school. Although the middle and high school were in the same building they had separate schedules, principals, and the classrooms were at opposite ends of the school.

The middle school of this particular district was made up of students in grades 5 through 8. The middle school had one special education teacher, and one reading AIS teacher. According to the New York State Report card (2015), the middle school services grades five through eight and a total of 312 students. One hundred sixty-five of the students were male and 147 of the students were female. Two hundred ninety one of the students were white, eight were Hispanic or Latino, six were multiracial, five were Asian, and two were black. Twenty-four students at the school had disabilities, and 79 students were eligible for free or reduced lunch. The middle school offers many different extra-curricular activities and numerous sports teams to keep the students active in the school outside of regular school hours (NYSED Data Site, 2015).

In the middle school, I work as the teaching assistant in the AIS reading classroom. The AIS teacher that I work with provides reading intervention services to an average of fifteen students each day. The students range from fifth grade through eighth grade. These students have all been referred to an AIS classroom due to their lack of documented growth in the area of reading. Some

of the students receive special education services in addition to the AIS interventions they receive. I have the opportunity to work one-on-one with students throughout the day focusing on fluency, reading comprehension, and phonics skills. The reading teacher uses the Wilson Reading Program to supplement the instruction that the students receive in their general education English class (Wilson Reading System, 2016).

### **Positionality as Researcher**

I am a white female in my mid-twenties who grew up in a suburban town in Central New York. I am a graduate student currently attending The College at Brockport where I am pursuing a Master's degree in Literacy Education B-12. I earned a bachelor's degree from The State University of New York College at Oneonta in Childhood Education 1-6. I also have an associate's degree from Mohawk Valley Community College in Childhood Education 1-6. I am certified by the state of New York to teach grades 1-6. The 2015-2016 school year is my first year working in my current school, and my third year working in an AIS classroom. Being in these positions has allowed me the opportunity to work at both the elementary and middle school settings helping students who need extra help in both reading and math.

I have a passion for teaching, and working in a school allows me the opportunity to follow my passion. My goal for the students I work with is for them to grow up to be contributing members of society. In order for them to be successful, an overall grasp on literacy is important for them to attain. The skills learned through literacy plays a crucial role in a student's academic success as well as their success outside of school. To best support these students I want to gain a better understanding of RtI and how it is implemented in a middle school setting. In the future, I would like to use this data to guide my instruction, in hopes of helping my students be more

successful in school. In this study, I am the AIS Teaching Assistant, and I am taking on the role of participant observer.

### **Data Collection**

The data that I collected for the purposes of this study were collected through interviews, observation notes, and a reflection journal. I interviewed each of the teachers four times throughout this study. I created four sets of interview questions that I asked the teachers during each of the interview sessions. With permission from the teacher, I audio-recorded each of the interviews and then transcribed each interview. These interviews provided me with data that helped me answer my research questions regarding what role each of the teachers play in the RtI process at our school. The interviews also allowed me to compare answers of the two teachers in order to determine the similarities of their answers to determine what the important requirements are for RtI, and how they each believe they work together to create a successful RtI process.

During this study I also collected data through classroom observations. I observed each of the teachers twice a week for four weeks during instructional times with students. As I observed, I took notes, focused on recording what interventions the teachers have used with the students. I used any questions that I developed as a result of my observations as a guide for the following interview with the specific teacher. The observation notes were recorded in a double entry journal format.

### **Procedures**

During my data collection, I observed the special education teacher and the reading AIS teacher twice a week for the four weeks of this study. Each of the observations lasted one class period, which is about 40 minutes. As I observed the teachers, I took observational notes specifically around the strategies they used when they were working with students. After each of the observations, I took 10 minutes to debrief and reflect on what I observed in the classroom in my

reflection journal. As I took observations notes, and reflected in my journal, I made copies of the notes and categorized them by date, and teacher to which the content related.

The second part of data collection was to conduct individual weekly interviews with the special education teacher and the reading AIS teacher. I interviewed each of them once a week for four weeks, giving me a total of 4 interviews per teacher. The interviews lasted no more than one half hour each. I conducted the interviews and observations during times that were approved by the teacher involved. For example, I met with the teachers for the interviews during a time that did not interfere with their teaching time or planning time. Any observations that I made were conducted when it was convenient for the teacher, and I did not interrupt any lessons.

### **Trustworthiness**

I conducted a qualitative study and utilized one-on-one interviews with teachers to ensure my research design was valid. My research was conducted over a four-week span. I remained open to various interpretations of the data collected, and understood that the data may vary from the expectations that I might have had. Strategies outlined by Clark and Creswell (2014) were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the research study findings. To verify the credibility of the research study I triangulated information from multiple data sources, including individual interviews, observational notes, and a reflection journal. This study provided detailed descriptions of participants, research process, and the data so other researchers can analyze this study or conduct a similar study.

### **Data Analysis**

I analyzed my data using a several step process. The first step was to use transcription as a way to turn all the audio-recorded interviews into typed text. In this study I did not transcribe these interviews verbatim; instead I chose to create charts that gave me a brief comparison of each of the

teacher's answers during the interviews. I was able to do this with the majority of the questions throughout the four interviews as a result of asking both teachers the same questions. Another step I had to take was to review the notes that I took, and I spent time reviewing important aspects of each observation and connected it to research and the sources that my study had been built around. Similarly, after each of the interviews I conducted I completed a reflective journal answering two questions about each of the interviews. The first question asked, "What were the most important ideas that came from this interview?" The second question asked, "How will the outcomes of this interview shape the next interview? As a result of the methods I used to collect my data including one-on-one interviews, and observations with individual teachers, I used a constant comparison method to analyze the data that were collected. Shagoury and Power (2012) state that the constant comparison method of data analysis "involves deriving categories from data over time, and then using the categories to build theory" (p. 143). Collecting these data through interviews and classroom observations provided me with the data that were necessary to create themes that would lead me to create the codes I used to work through the data collected.

The themes that I discovered through this process were as follows. First, I determined that even though both the special education teacher and the AIS reading teacher are both very active in the implementation process, in this RtI model, their specific roles are different. Second, it was evident that both of the participants in my study use the same intervention programs throughout the day, even though they might use the programs in different ways. A third theme I found was that both of the participants in this study have very similar views of what the important components of RtI are, specifically in this middle school.

**Finding One: Different Teachers – Different Roles**

The RtI team at the middle school discussed throughout this study is made up of numerous individuals throughout the building including: both the participants of this study, the building principal, the school psychologist, 2 ELA teachers, one classroom Math teacher, and the Math AIS classroom teacher. None of these individuals play the exact same role in this process. Through my interviews it was apparent that even though both the Special Education teacher and the Reading AIS teacher both play very active roles in the process of Response to Intervention, the roles that they play within the implementation process are vastly different on a day-to-day basis.

The middle school Special Education Teacher is responsible for the students who are classified according to the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). One of her daily responsibilities is teaching special class ELA and math to fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, which requires her to modify the curriculum for each individual student in order to meet the needs listed on his/her Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). In addition to modifying both ELA and Math lessons for each of her nine students, she is also responsible for providing achievement testing for the students once every three years, and administering the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessments to each student three times a year. During the Common Core ELA and Math assessments she provides accommodations for her students, which includes providing the students with separate location, test read to student, and other accommodations according to a student's IEP. The special Education teacher must also frequently attend CSE (Committee on Special Education) meetings revolving around the students she teaches.

The Special Education Teacher does not teach any students in general education settings nor does she push into any general education classes with her students. The instruction time for the

students in special class ELA and special class Math are each eighty minutes a day, which is double the amount of time that the students in the general education classes receive. Some of her students also have an additional block of time that they are in her room for resource. During the resource blocks is when this teacher provides the individualized interventions.

The biggest intervention that she uses in her room is the Wilson Reading System. According to Wilson Reading System, 2014, “WRS (Wilson Reading System) directly and systematically teaches the structure of the English language. Through the program, students learn fluent decoding and encoding skills to the level of mastery” (2014, p.1). The students who receive instruction using this system work five days a week in order to master the skills they need to meet the rigor of their curriculum. This teacher also uses 1:1 guided reading instruction in her classroom on a daily basis. All of the interventions used in her classroom must be modified in order to meet the needs of her students. The school uses a vocabulary program called *Wordly Wise 3000* (Wordly Wise 3000, 2016). Most of the classrooms take 5 days to complete one of the vocabulary lessons, which consists of five lesson activities around a set of ten-fifteen words. To modify this for her students, they work through the vocabulary at a much slower pace. To monitor the success of the interventions she implements in her classroom, there is an 8 to 10-week period of time when a new intervention is tried before determining whether or not that student is making adequate progress.

The students that this teacher works with on a daily basis have all been classified under IDEA, therefore none of them are classified as Tier I, or Tier II of the Response to Intervention model. One of the questions I asked during one of the interviews said, “Which responsibilities of your job relate to RTI in the middle school?” She responded by saying, “I don’t work with any students in the general education settings, but because I’m on CSE (Committee on Special Education), as well as on the RTI team, I have an understanding of how the students in the school are moving through the tiers. I pay especially close attention to the students receiving Tier III

support because after two failed interventions at Tier III, there is a referral to CSE where we review the interventions that have occurred, and determine whether or not the student has a learning disability.”

The daily instruction that is provided by the Special Education teacher consists of numerous one-on-one and small group interactions throughout the day. She is responsible for teaching these students the core subjects of English and Math. When planning these lessons, she uses the same curriculum guides as the other teachers in the building, following the New York State Common Core Standards, but she modifies each of the lessons in order to meet the needs of her students. Much of the work in her classroom is done as a group, with her monitoring and redirecting the students as needed.

The middle school reading AIS teacher is responsible for students across many different achievement levels. Throughout her day she meets with students receiving Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III interventions as they relate to the three-tier RTI model. The Tier II and Tier III interventions that she provides for the middle school students each day consist of forty minute lessons. One of the classes she teaches each day is a forty minute sixth grade reading class. It is through this class that she provides the Tier I support to her students. The achievement levels in her reading class vary greatly, and as a result, she makes numerous modifications to her reading lessons as a way to differentiate the curriculum.

The general structure of the AIS lessons is mostly consistent across the grade levels, however each of the targeted interventions are designed around the needs of each individual student. During the Common Core ELA and Math assessments the AIS reading teacher provides accommodations for students which include providing them with separate location, tests read, and other accommodations according to a student’s IEP. The AIS reading teacher must also frequently

attend ISST (Instructional Support Services Team) meetings at which she is required to share any data that she has collected from a specific student through the interventions she uses.

Similar to the special education teacher, the biggest intervention that the reading AIS teacher uses in her room is the Wilson Reading System. The students who receive instruction through Wilson have specific learning goals, as well as explicit timelines to follow through the program. All of the interventions used in her classroom must be modified in order to meet the needs of her students. Unlike the students in the special education classroom, not all of the students in the AIS classroom receive Wilson instruction. There are numerous Tier II students who are in AIS because they struggle with comprehension, inferential thinking, and numerous other specific components of reading and literacy instruction.

The AIS reading teacher described the AIS classroom as “the most important room in the school.” She went on to describe for me the importance of helping the lower achieving students master the skills they need in order to support them and at the same time prevent them from slipping through the cracks. The students that this teacher works with in the AIS classroom on a daily basis have all been classified as Tier I, Tier II, or Tier III according to the Response to Intervention model. I asked this teacher the same question I asked the special education teacher which was, “Which responsibilities of your job relate to RTI in the middle school?” This teacher said, “In my reading class I am constantly using Tier I interventions by differentiating my instruction to meet the needs of each of my students, because in that class I have a wide range of abilities. On the other hand, in my AIS classes, I frequently use the method of re-teaching as a way to fill the gaps with my Tier II students.”

Through my observations and interviews in each of these teachers’ classrooms, I was able to create a clear sense of what each of their roles was surrounding Response to Intervention in the middle school. Although each of the teachers plays an important role in the process of RTI, the

roles which they play are different. The biggest difference between the roles of these teachers surrounds the students in which they teach. The Special Education teacher does not work with any general education students, but the Reading AIS teacher works with general education students on a daily basis. As a result of the different students each teacher works with, they must use different interventions in order to meet the needs of their specific students.

### **Finding Two: Same Interventions: Different Uses**

Through the research I conducted at this middle school, I found multiple similarities regarding the intervention programs that are used in this Response to Intervention model. The two teachers who were participants in my study used many of the same programs with the students in their respective classrooms. As I observed and interviewed these teachers, I learned that although they were both using and discussing the same intervention programs, each of them used these intervention programs in different way to support the specific needs of the students being given instruction. The four main programs that are used in the Response to Intervention model at this middle school include, *Wordly Wise*, *Raz-Kids*, *Wilson Reading System*, and the *Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System*. I will briefly explain each of these interventions, and will continue by discussing exactly how each of the participants in my study used them in their respective classrooms to support the Response to Intervention model.

#### **Wordly Wise**

*Wordly Wise 3000* is an instructional program for vocabulary, “which focuses on preparing students with strategies to unlock the meaning of words they will encounter in content area texts, literature, and high-stakes tests” (*Wordly Wise 3000*, 2016). Specifically, at the middle school level this program helps students with skills that will help them be more successful as they continue through middle and high school (2016). In this particular district, the students use *Wordly Wise*

*3000* from first grade through eighth grade. In the middle school, I saw this program being used with two sets of sixth grade students.

The special education teacher uses *Wordly Wise 3000* in her sixth grade special class ELA. In this setting she has three sixth grade students who require Tier III interventions, and due to the reading level of these students the teacher has been using the fifth grade vocabulary book with them since the beginning of this year. Each lesson has 10-15 words listed glossary style, including part of speech, and the definition(s) of the word. This program also supplies the students with a sentence in which that word is being used. Much of the work done with this program in this particular class, is as a whole group. The lesson begins with the pronunciation of each of the words. The students write each of the words in their vocabulary notebooks to reinforce the spelling of each word. The students take turns reading the definitions of each of the words with the teaching providing explanations as necessary in order for the students to fully understand the words. Individually the students create a three to four-word definition of each of the words, and write it in their notebooks. This allows them to use language that is familiar to them and which they can easily understand. The students pick 5 of the words which they must fill out a modified Frayer Model as a way to visualize the word, definition, synonym, examples and non-examples. According to McKenzie (2014), the Frayer Model is, “A four square model in which students and teachers define the word, list its characteristics, and give examples and non-examples of the target word” (p. 13). As the Special Education Teacher takes her students through each of the activities associated with a particular lesson, she modifies each activity to meet the needs of the students with whom she is working. The students complete the activities independently, but the special education teacher reviews directions and provides explicit instruction for each of the activities. These instructions allow the students to work on their own in the classroom, but also have the opportunity to ask clarifying questions if they have specific needs for a particular question.

*Wordly Wise 3000* is used by the Reading AIS teacher during her sixth grade reading class, and to her, it is more than just an intervention for her Tier II and Tier III students. This is a program that is used by general education teachers as a means of teaching vocabulary to students. As a result, the Tier I students in the reading class are given the opportunity to work at an independent pace as they work their way through each of the lessons. The AIS teacher gives some of the students a schedule to follow which depicts when each of the activities is due to be turned in for a grade.

The Tier II and Tier III students work their way through the lessons at a slower pace than the rest of the general education reading class. Instead of being assigned an entire activity for one night, these students are only required to complete a portion of the activity for the next class. These students meet with the teacher for an additional AIS period each day which is a total of 40 extra minutes. On certain days during this extra period, the *Wordly Wise* assignments are reviewed, and the students are given additional amount of time to ask any pertinent questions.

### **Raz-Kids**

*Raz Kids* is a product of the Learning A-Z Company, “that provides comprehensive leveled reading resources for students, with hundreds of eBooks offered at 27 different levels of reading difficulty” (Raz-Kids, 2016). This interactive program allows students to work independently reading self-selected texts at their reading ability, or by following along with the assignments created by the classroom teacher through the online teacher’s corner which is designed to allow teachers to manage the students who are working on *Raz-Kids*.

The majority of the time the Special Education teacher uses *Raz-Kids* in her classroom is as a way to assess fluency. One of the features of this program allows the students the opportunity to read aloud, and be recorded as they are reading through the text. When a student has completed

their reading, the recording of it is sent to the teacher's corner on the website and saves it there until the teacher has a chance to listen to it and score the reading. When I talked to the special education teacher about this, she said, "I really like that it gives the students the opportunity to go somewhere in the room and read aloud independently without having a teacher reading over their shoulder, or marking up a page as they are reading. Since most of the students I have are in here multiple times throughout the day, giving them independent work is something they can look forward to, even if it is reading."

The Reading AIS teacher uses *Raz-Kids* as a supplemental instructional tool during her AIS reading lessons. According to the Reading AIS teacher, "the student friendly layout of this web-based resource engages the students and allows them to read through texts at their own pace, or listen to texts being read to them as they follow along on the screen." During the majority of her AIS lessons, this teacher has two or three students in her classroom at one time. Sometimes the students are at the same grade level, and other times multiple grade levels are represented in the classroom during a class period.

Each of the lessons are planned in a way which allows the whole group to work together at the beginning, and then she spends time working one on one with each of the students. During this one on one time, the student(s) who are not working with the teacher have the opportunity to complete their independent work. One of the options for this independent work is to complete a lesson on *Raz-Kids*. When the students log on to this resource, either on a computer or a tablet, they begin working on an assignment the teacher has specifically created for them to complete.

The component of this program that the AIS teacher has the students working on most often is reading comprehension. The students read, or have the text read to them as the first part of the activity. The second part is a retelling portion, which allows the students to speak into the tablet and record what they remember about what they have just read. The final part of the activity is for

the student to answer five multiple choice comprehension questions about the story. All of the data that were collected from these activities are available for the teacher to go in and view on the computer. This gives the teacher an up to date understanding of the progress that the students she is working with are making in reading comprehension as measured by *Raz-Kids*.

### **Wilson Reading System**

I briefly discussed the Wilson Reading System and the role that it plays in the classrooms of these two teachers earlier in this article. Through my interviews and observations, I was able to gain a detailed understanding around how this program is used in different ways within the two classrooms. This program provides intensive reading interventions to students who are not making sufficient gains in reading through other sources of instruction.

The Special Education teacher uses the Wilson system five days a week in one on one settings with three of her students. Each of these students is in a different grade level and therefore each of the lessons is modified to meet the needs of the individual student. The overall structure of the lessons is the same for all her students, but the content is different depending on which sub-step is being taught. There is a specific sound associated with each sub-step for example the vowel combinations of oa, and oe. Once the student becomes familiar with the sound, the program provides words that contain each of the sounds.

To engage the students during these lessons, the Special Education teacher provides the students with many different ways to form and practice the words including reading the words off index cards, writing the words on a whiteboard, using string to spell out the words, and using shaving cream on a cookie sheet to spell out the words. The program also provides magnets and a magnet board that the students can use to practice each of the sounds. While I was observing in this class I was reminded of the many ways elementary teachers have their students do word work in

centers and found that even at the middle school level the students were engaged when provided with these different learning opportunities.

The Special Education teacher uses the Wilson program across multiple grade levels each day. There is only one class period where she has one on one instruction with a student, and the rest of the time she teaches Wilson, she has small groups of students. The instruction that she uses when she is teaching the lessons to her students is identical across all grade levels. She does not differentiate between the different students or grade levels, and uses the same techniques and approach for each of her lessons. When the students are reviewing words and sounds, she only has them read off index cards, and they can use the magnet board as they read through the sounds that pertain to a particular lesson.

Through my observations and interviews I learned that the teacher wants to do more with the lessons, but because of the way the system is set up she is concerned that the program will not work if she tries to modify the way it is set up. She stated, “Barbara Wilson would not have set the lessons up the way she did if they did not work. I need to follow what she created in order for the interventions to be effective for the students I work with every day.”

### **Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System**

The Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System kit for grades 3-8 contains 30 leveled fiction and non-fiction books written specifically for the kit and CDs with assessment forms to manage students’ scores. Teachers use the books in the kit to match students’ reading levels to the Fountas and Pinnell 26-level text gradient.

(Tompkins, 2010, p. 67)

This assessment system is a traditional way for teachers to evaluate students' progress in fluency and comprehension. The teachers who were participants in this study both rely on this system as a way to monitor student progress throughout the year.

The Special Education teacher uses the benchmark assessment four times throughout the year. She begins the year by assessing all her students, because although she has the data from the previous year, when the students arrive in September, they have now been out of school for two full months. She collects her second set of data from her students using this system in December before the students leave for holiday break. The third set of data collection comes in March, and the final time she collects data is in June, before school lets out for the summer. Each time she evaluates a student, she does a running record while the student reads a story, and then asks comprehension questions at the end that the student answers verbally. She is able to take this data to the RtI meetings and use it to discuss the needs of the individual students.

The Reading AIS teacher uses the Benchmark Assessment system to determine the needs of the students that she works with, but she only collects this data three times a year, in September, January, and June. In addition to taking this data to meetings to ensure that each student is receiving the proper services and the correct intensity of interventions, this teacher also uses the data she collects to guide the AIS instruction that she does within her classroom. Through the assessments she is able to tell where each student struggles, and as a result of this, she can plan lessons that center around strengthening those areas.

The data that both of the teachers collect through this assessment is very important to the RtI process. The reading levels of students can help determine the services they receive and in what Tier of RtI they should be placed. Communication between these teachers is crucial surrounding this data, because it could easily mean the difference between a student being Tier III, and needing a referral for special education courses.

Even though there is certain intervention programs used in this middle school, they are not used in the same way by all of the teachers. The data I collected led me to the determination that the Special Education teacher, and Reading AIS teacher use four of the same interventions throughout the school year, but the ways that they use them differ from classroom to classroom.

### **Finding Three: Components of Middle School Model of Response to Intervention**

In order to gain a more detailed understanding of Response to Intervention, specifically at the middle school level, I was interested in gaining the perspective of the two teachers involved in this study and their thoughts surrounding what should be present in the RTI model at the middle school level. Through my interviews I was able to understand what each of the teachers believed to be important surrounding RTI in their middle school. Both of the teachers provided me with their top three things that they believe should be present in a middle school RTI model.

The Special Education teacher's first important component was identifying struggling learners. She discussed with me that it is imperative that as a district the correct steps are being taken to identify these students as struggling learners as early as possible. She stated, "with RTI, the sooner we know a student is struggling, and we are able to determine what exactly that student is struggling with, the sooner we can provide the proper services. With any luck, the student will not end up being classified as a special education student." This was something that she was very passionate about as we discussed RTI. It is her hope that by having this in place it will cut down on the number of students who are classified and instead help the students who just need a little extra motivation to get the support they need to continue through school with all their peers.

The second component of RTI that the Special Education teacher believes is essential is the creation of specifically designed interventions that focus on working on the student's specific needs. The key word that she discussed around this component was individualizing lessons. Getting to

know the students you work with, and understanding what motivates them and the best environment for them to be successful is essential. There are numerous intervention programs that can be used, and when we modify these interventions for students we are giving them all the tools they need in order to be successful.

The last component of RTI that the Special Education teacher believed to be important is the process of assessing specific skills in order to determine student progress. She was very explicit as she explained her view about assessments, and making sure that teachers are choosing assessments that are going to provide the most accurate data around the specific skill that is being looked at. She said that sometimes this means the student will have to undergo multiple assessments in order to determine different types of progress, but that it is okay. As long as we as teachers are collecting the correct data we will help stop students from falling through the cracks as a result of not collecting enough, or not collecting the correct types of data.

The Reading AIS teacher also gave me three components that she believed should be present in a middle school RTI model. The first component she discussed with me was based around a concern that although there are numerous people throughout the district using probes to collect data, it is important that as a district there be consistent agreed upon probes that are used in the same way by everyone at each specific tier. For example, if there are two students at Tier II receiving an intervention for the exact same skill, the teachers doing the interventions should be using the same data collection methods.

This specific teacher is responsible for students in grades five through eight who require extra assistance in reading. Many of the fifth grade students she works with have been receiving AIS reading support at the primary school before moving to the middle school. This teacher discussed her concerns around the fact that when she receives data from the primary school for these students the methods of data collection are completely different than what is used in the

middle and high school. This results in more work for the middle school AIS teacher because she then becomes responsible for either transferring the data from the primary school, or collecting her own data using the data collection methods the middle school uses.

The second component that she thought was needed in this model of RTI was a universal way of identifying struggling readers. She, like the Special Education teacher believed that it is extremely important to determine who the struggling readers are as early in their education as possible, and start getting them the help that they need. If by chance a student makes it to the middle school, and that is where the struggle to read becomes prominent it is important for all teachers to document reading behaviors including struggles and successes so that when it comes to providing that student with services, there is already some data to back up the decisions being made.

The last component that the Reading AIS teacher believed was important in this model of RTI was that a clear follow through by the committee on special education (CSE) be put in place in order to help teachers determine if a child needs to be classified. As of now, there is what this teacher referred to as a significant delay, between the time a student is referred, and the time that a meeting takes place to discuss the specific needs of the student. For the teacher, this seemed to center around communication between the members of the Response to Intervention Team and the members of CSE. She stressed the importance of getting all members on the same page in order to help move the process along if a student is in need of more support than is provided during Tier III interventions.

As a result of the interviews I conducted with the two teacher participants in my study, I was able to gain an understanding around the components of RTI that each of the teachers considered important in a middle school RTI model. These two teachers did not have identical ideas of the important components, but one component each believed to be imperative at the middle school level, was the process of identifying struggling readers. Both of the teachers discussed the idea that

the way struggling readers should be identified should be identical, not just in the middle school but across the district as well. Johnson, Smith, & Harris (2009) state, “Screening needs to include the specific indicators that are the best predictors of determining students at risk for eventually dropping out of school. Screening instruments are devised to be brief and efficient assessments, which accurately identify students who may be at risk for failure” (p. 54).

## Discussion

### Summary of Findings

The purpose of this study was to determine how one middle school implements the comprehensive framework of Response to Intervention in order to meet the needs of struggling readers. The study was concentrated around three research questions:

- *What role does the middle school reading teacher play in the RTI process?*
- *What role does the middle school special education teacher play in the RTI process?*
- *What are the most important requirements for a successful RTI program?*

Throughout my four-week study I learned that although the Special Education teacher and reading AIS teacher both play significant roles in the RTI model at this middle school, there was an agreement that in order for this model to be successful at their middle school, specific components should be in place across all middle school grade levels. One of those components should be a definitive process for identifying struggling readers.

Data analysis revealed that although the Special Education teacher and the Reading AIS teacher both play a role in the RTI process, their individual roles are different. Reading teachers have the understanding of the early literacy stages, as well as strategies that work to support struggling readers. In many cases these teachers are the individuals responsible for providing the interventions to students (Shanahan, 2008). On the side of the Special Education teacher, analysis

showed that one of the main purposes of a Response to Intervention model is to help decrease the number of students who are placed in special education classes (Allington, 2009). Data analysis also indicated that there are numerous screening tools available to teachers in order to identify struggling readers, and specifically identify the specific areas in which students struggle. The school should agree on indicators that will be the basis for the data collection process. By collecting the same information for numerous students, the process will be uniform (Johnson, Smith, & Harris, 2009).

### **Conclusions & Implications**

#### **Conclusion 1: The Special Education teacher works solely with students classified under IDEA.**

The results of the study show that that the Special Education teacher is responsible for the students for whom Tier III interventions did not work. The support that Tier III interventions provide has the ability to allow students to successfully benefit from the intense interventions and allows them to get back on the same track as the other students in their grade level. On the other hand, special education many times becomes a place where students are labeled and placed, and in turn, they have a very difficult time breaking the barriers and coming out of the special education setting (Howard, 2009). The study also found that Response to Intervention is the system put into place to reduce the number of students placed into special education classes. After students have had three failed interventions at Tier III of the Response to Intervention model, the referral to special education courses acts as the very last step in the RTI process (Allington, 2009). It was evident through my interactions with the participants in this study that this is what takes place at this particular middle school. There is much data collection, collaboration, and decision making that goes into the determination that a student requires a referral to special education, and if there is

agreement among the individuals on the Response to Intervention Team, as well as with the parents of a given student, action is taken to begin the process of classifying that student under IDEA.

### **Implication 1**

Middle schools looking to integrate the three-tier RTI model into their schools must have a strategic action plan in place that will provide all teachers and administrators involved in the process, an ample amount of professional development to ensure all individuals involved are receiving the same information regarding the differences between students receiving special education services, and students who are receiving Tier I, II, and III interventions.

### **Conclusion 2: The Reading AIS teacher provides interventions for Tier I, II and III students.**

After analyzing the data, it was determined that the Reading AIS teacher works daily with students across all Tiers of the three-tier RTI model that this middle school has implemented. She uses targeted interventions that are specific to the students with whom she is working. Research shows that one of the most vigorous parts of RTI implementation at the middle school level is creating a collection of interventions that are strong, effective, and meet the needs of the student population that will be affected by them (Johnson, Smith, & Harris, 2009). In order to do this prior to choosing interventions, the RTI team at the middle school must determine the specific needs of the students. Once these needs are determined, discussions may begin around the interventions that will best benefit the students. It is apparent from my observations and interviews with two different members of the RTI team at this middle school that the interventions that are used are chosen only after significant research has been done and it has been tested by one individual first. Some of the products that are used for interventions are expensive, and therefore it is important that they be tested out first. Each year the RTI team comes together and discusses the students who are in need of interventions. From there they determine whether or not the building currently has sufficient

programs to meet the needs of the students. If the school does not have an intervention program that would work for a specific student, the team begins discussing the steps that need to be taken to find an appropriate intervention program.

### **Implication 2**

Choosing interventions for teachers to use within an RTI model is crucial to the overall effectiveness of the model throughout the school. In the case of this middle school, there is only one individual providing the reading interventions for the Tier I, II, and III students in the building. In larger buildings however, there is going to be more than one individual performing the same tasks surrounding the interventions. The way interventions look may differ depending on the student, but it is important that all individuals involved maintain the same expectations and have the same goals in mind no matter which student is being provided the intervention.

### **Conclusion 3: The important components of a three-tier Response to Intervention model at the middle school setting could be different according to different teachers.**

After analyzing the data gathered from the interviews with each of the participants in this study, it was determined that even two teachers that work in the same building do not have the same ideas when it comes to determining what the important aspects of the Response to Intervention model might be at the middle school. One component that the two teachers did agree on as being important is that the way that struggling readers are identified in the school needs to be more consistent. From conversations I had with each teacher, I concluded that neither teacher believed that the way struggling readers were determined in the district was consistent across the district. The research consistently discussed universal screening, and its importance within a middle school RTI model, but the screenings discussed were focused on students that have already been placed into Tiers I, II or III of the RTI model. Howard (2009) states, “Universal assessment – or screening,

conducted three times a year, is a key feature of RTI. Student progress is monitored throughout instruction to determine effectiveness” (p. 32). This particular middle school’s RTI team is working on creating a system of tools that will help remove the issue of inconsistent means of identifying the struggling learners within the school.

### **Implication 3**

There are no pre-determined components of a Response to Intervention model, and it is up to individual school districts, or individual buildings to determine the components that would best suit their needs. It was already discussed in the case of this particular middle school that there was not continuity among the screening assessments that were being used, and this could have been a result of the fact that different teachers believe that there are different components that should be part of the RTI model. If the RTI team cannot come up with a universal screening assessment plan, there is a chance that the RTI model will not be as successful as it would be if they were all on the same page. It is understood that teachers may have their own philosophies about the way that struggling readers are identified. However, when it comes to Response to Intervention, having consistency across a school or district surrounding the identification of struggling readers can make the RTI model even stronger.

### **Limitations**

The particular middle school in which I conducted my study was in a rural area, and therefore small in size. Consequently, the sample size of the interviews I conducted as well as the observations I made were also small. Due to the fact that I was the only researcher conducting the study, I was limited to my own perspective while analyzing the data that were collected. The time frame that I had to complete my research was narrow due to unforeseen circumstances and because

of that I did not have enough time to collect quantitative data from the students as a way to determine the successfulness of the RTI process at this middle school.

### **Research Suggestions**

Based on the results of my study I believe that more research should be done surrounding the success of the Response to Intervention process in middle school. The research should include data from numerous middle schools across the United States. The following are the suggestions that I have for future researchers surrounding Response to Intervention in a middle school setting: roles of general education teachers in the middle school RTI model, most successful screening and progress monitoring tools used in middle schools, and most successful strategies used by general education teachers at the middle school level.

### **Overall Significance**

Response to Intervention has been widely used at the elementary level for a number of years, but is becoming a more frequent topic of discussion among middle schools as of late. The results of my research have provided a look at Response to Intervention through the lens of one middle school, and specifically through the perspectives of two important members of the RTI team. By looking at RTI through these two perspectives awareness has been raised that when it comes to RTI at the middle school level, the model is still in the developing stages. There is much more research that needs to be done around how successful the middle school RTI model is for students and the impact it has on their education through high school.

## References

- Allington, R. (2009). *What really matters in Response to Intervention: Research Based Designs*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education Inc.
- Bender, W. (2012). *RTI in middle and high schools*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree Press
- Brozo, W. (2009). Response to Intervention or responsive instruction? Challenges and possibilities to intervention for adolescent literacy. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 53(4), 277-281.
- Brozo, W. (2011). *RTI and the adolescent reader: Responsive literacy instruction in secondary schools*. Newark, DE: Teaching College Press.
- Census.gov (2010). Retrieved February 3, 2015, from <http://www.census.gov/>
- Clark, V. L. P., & Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Understanding research: A consumer's guide* (2nd ed.). New York: Pearson.
- Dulaney, S. (2012). A middle school's Response-to-Intervention journey: Building systematic processes of facilitation, collaboration, and implementation. *NASSP Bulletin*, 97(1), 53-7
- Esteves, K.J., & Whitten, E. (2014). *RTI in middle school classrooms: proven tools and strategies*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing Inc.
- Fitzell, S.G. (2011). *RTI: Strategies for secondary teachers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Geltner, J. A., & Leibforth, T. (2008). Advocacy in the IEP Process: strengths-based school counseling in action. *Professional School Counseling*, 12(2), 162–165.
- Howard, M. (2009). *RTI from all sides: What every teacher needs to know*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Johnson, E., Smith, L., & Harris, M. (2009) *How RTI works in secondary schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

- Johnsen, S. S., Parker, S. L., & Farah, Y. N. (2015). Providing services for students with gifts and talents within a Response-to-Intervention framework. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 47(4), 226-233.
- Mesmer, E., & Mesmer, H. (2008). Response to Intervention (RTI): What teachers of reading need to know. *The Reading Teacher*, 64(4), 280-290.
- National Center on Response to Intervention. (2011) RTI implementation process for middle schools. Washington D.C. *U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs*.
- National Center on Response to Intervention. (2013). RTI in middle schools: the essential components. Washington D.C. *U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs*.
- NYSED Data Site. (2015). Retrieved March 30, 2016, from <https://data.nysed.gov/profile.php?instid=800000051038>
- O'Reilly, T., Sabatini, J., Bruce, K., Pillarisetti, S., & McCormick, C. (2012) Middle school reading assessment: What matters under an RtI framework. *Reading Psychology*, 33, 162-189.
- Prewett, S., Mellard, D., Deshler, D., Allen, J., Alexander, R., & Stern, A. (2012). Response to Intervention in middle schools: practices and outcomes. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 27(3), 136-147.
- Shagoury, R., & Power, B.R. (2012). *Living the Questions: A guide for teacher researchers*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Shanahan, T. (2008). Implications of RTI for the reading teacher. *Response to Intervention: A framework for reading educators*. (pp. 105-122) Fuchs, D., Fuchs, L., & Vaughn, S. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Spear-Swerling, L., & Cheesman, E. (2011). Teachers' knowledge base for implementing Response

To-Intervention models in reading. *Reading and Writing*, 25, 1691-1723.

Tomlinson, C.A. (2014). *The differentiated classroom*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Tompkins, G. E. (2010). *Literacy in the middle grades: Teaching reading and writing to fourth through eighth graders* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

#### Websites

Raz-Kids. (2016). Retrieved April 24, 2016, from <https://www.raz-kids.com/main/AboutRazKids/>

Wilson Reading System. (2016). Retrieved March 30, 2016, from

<http://www.wilsonlanguage.com/programs/wilson-reading-system/>

Wordly Wise 3000. (2016). Retrieved April 24, 2016, from

<http://eps.schoolspecialty.com/products/literacy/vocabulary/wordly-wise-3000-3rd-edition/components>