RESEARCH REPORT

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

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored the experiences of administrators while implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) in early/middle years schools in rural Manitoba. Six principals 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 decision to implement RTI resulted from a need to support students who presented gaps in their skills. The decision was made by principals and superintendents in order to close the skill gaps. The principals shared the experiences that they encountered during the implementation process as well as expected and unexpected results of implementing RTI in the school. The principals 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.

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 1970s 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 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 the 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 among the members of the team and based on data that had been gathered on the students' performance with the interventions.

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. While all three tiers exist simultaneously, a student will be placed in only 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, a Tier 3 placement will be made for that student.
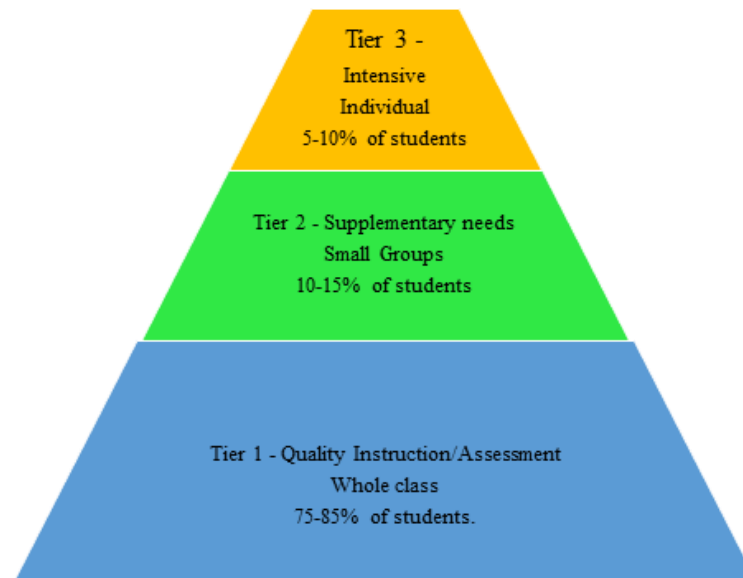

Figure 1. The RTI Pyramid of Interventions

Quality Tier 1 instruction is based on a variety of teaching pedagogies. Differentiated Instruction, Balanced Literacy, Backwards Design, Universal Design for Learning, Culturally Responsive Instruction, Precision Teaching, and Assessment Intervention Monitoring System 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. 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.

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.

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. 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 students 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. 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.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of principals who have attempted to implement RTI, and to seek to discover best practices for its successful implementation on a school-wide basis. Principals 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.

Answers to the Research Questions

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

   The six schools were rural Manitoban schools. School populations ranged from 60-450 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 principals considered their 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 level II and III funded students. All schools reported a variety of extra-curricular activities for their students. 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 was 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 was another way of introducing staff to RTI. Information was shared from conferences with the whole group, sharing professional readings with staff, and sending 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 process if possible, listen to staff member concerns, and be prepared to answer questions. Some staff were more open to RTI 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 students. Once scheduling and common understanding were in place, the next pieces to consider were tracking the data and providing professional development focused on the differentiated instruction offered in Tier 1, and the specific interventions for Tiers 2 and 3.

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

   The expected results were no surprises to anyone. Students' needs were quickly recognized, and students received 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 for students. The principals and the teachers involved noticed a marked change in the way they taught. Scheduling led to common collaboration time, so that 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, and 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 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 feel 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 that are working with the RTI framework.

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

Participants shared various 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. Time needs to be 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 participate, do some modelling, give people time, common prep time, and time to really get their teeth into working through 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 make school improvements. This thesis study focused on early/middle years schools in rural Manitoba. Only six schools and principals participated in the research, so the findings represent a small percentage of rural Manitoba early/middle years schools that 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 rural Manitoba early/middle years schools with under 460 students. Teachers, students, families, and community members knew each other well. Decisions around implementing RTI were made

because of what the educators experienced in teaching reading and writing. The need was also seen by school administrators. While the impetus for adopting RTI came from a variety of agents, the ultimate decision to implement RTI was rooted in what was best for the students.

Each RTI program had different 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 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 and 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 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 to implement it. 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. Principals must offer support and pressure as needed to ensure that all staff are implementing best teaching practices for Tier 1 students and integrating Tier 2 interventions. 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.

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 successfully in rural schools. The advice given by all participants is informative, and easily followed by other administrators who wish to implement RTI in their own early/middle years Manitoban schools. 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 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.

About the Author

Alann Fraser is an administrator and a learning support teacher in a rural early and middle years school, which enables her to actively implement Response to Intervention programming for her students. Developing programming that supports all students is her priority. Alann also enjoys gardening and operating a greenhouse. Enjoying the outdoors through photography allows Alann to capture the changes of her gardens throughout the seasons.